

20 Stunning Venues To Say 'I Do'

TRAVEL + LEISURE

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ARCTIC ADVENTURE

From the Northern
Lights to Helsinki Nights

THROUGH THE LENS

The Enchantment
of Rapa Nui

Climate Warrior

Bhumi Pednekar

Romances History In Maheshwar

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The Intelligent Traveller

- 33 Save this handy guide to the dreamiest venues in India and abroad to help kickstart your wedding preparations; Shubhanshu Jain of The Wedding Matinee gives you the lowdown on the most picturesque locations in Dubai for tying the knot; fashion photographer Sanjeev Kumar and model Rikee Chatterjee talk about their love story and travelling together; designer Abhishek Ray and his partner Chaitanya Sharma get candid about their dreamy wedding in Kolkata, favourite destinations, and more; artist and designer Jayesh Sachdev speaks about creativity, fashion aesthetics, and AI; and this issue's Business Travel decodes the tech innovations that are shaping the aviation sector.

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ON HER: Outfit, **Rami Kadi**; earrings, **Diosa**; ring, **Joolry**; shoes, **Miu Miu**; all prices on request.

▲ Cover star Bhumi Pednekar soaks in Maheshwar's history at The Ahilya Fort Heritage Hotel. (p. 70).

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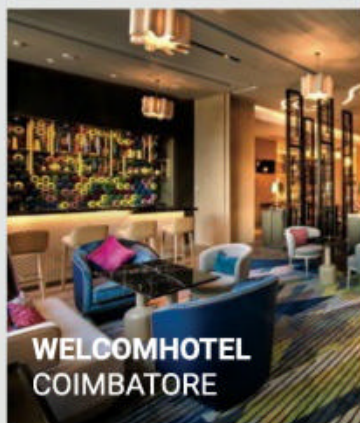
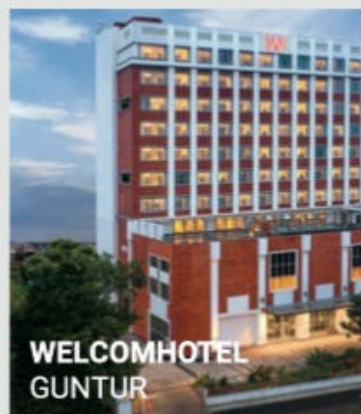
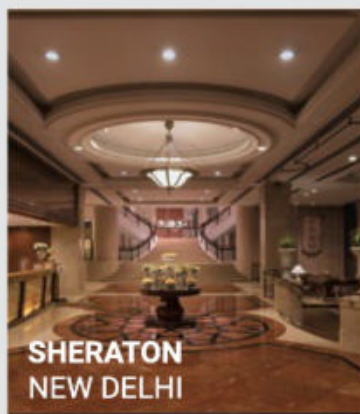
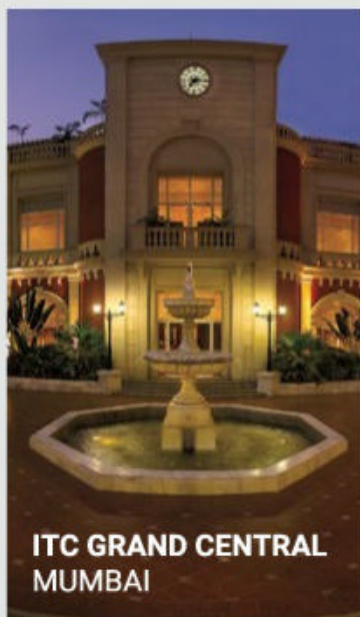
Your Best Shot

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ON THE COVER:

Climate warrior and actor Bhumi Pednekar at The Ahilya Fort Heritage Hotel in Maheshwar.

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LETTER *from The Editor*



IF YOU ASK ME what my first love is, I'd say travel without batting an eyelid. And what better time to celebrate love than February, the Valentine's month. Our February edition celebrates stories of love and travel, be it finding love in beautiful locales as did this couple (p. 48) or celebrating it on your honeymoon at these destinations around the world (p. 50). We also do a deep dive into the best wedding venues in India and abroad so you can have that perfect big day (p. 33).

A travelogue from the Finnish Lapland (p. 88) decodes the reasons for the happiness of the Finns, and another one takes you to Nairobi where heritage meets modernism (p. 82). Our photo essay takes you to Rapa Nui, a remote volcanic island in Polynesia that houses carved human figures with oversize heads from the 13th century.

In our cover feature, we take climate activist and actor Bhumi Pednekar to Maheshwar, a destination in Madhya

Pradesh that is as romantic as it is spiritual. Read how The Ahilya Fort Heritage Hotel, run by the Holkar family, guides by example when it comes to sustainability and boutique experiences (p. 70).

Also, stay tuned to travelandleisureasia.com as we unravel our 'Travel is Love' campaign that runs through all of February.

Aindrila

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FROM MY TRAVEL

*Clockwise from above:
River Narmada as seen
from The Ahilya Fort
Heritage Hotel; a sunset
over Narmada; by the
ghat in Maheshwar.*

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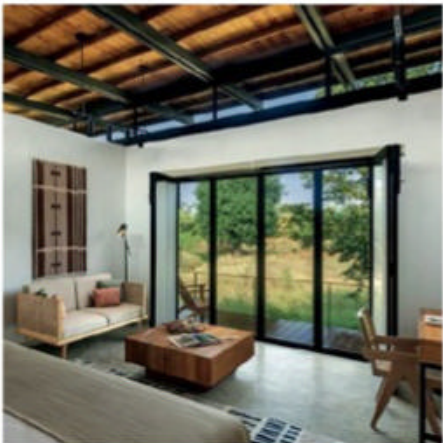
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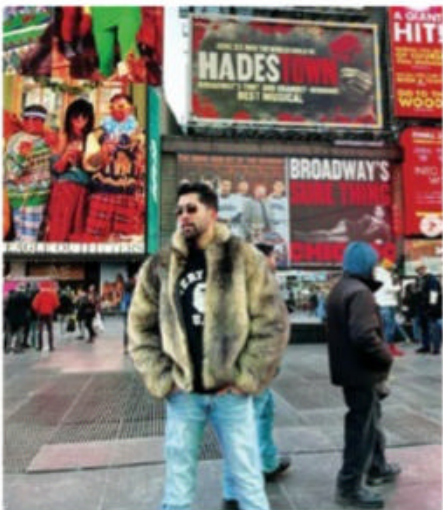
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PEOPLE
Explore the wilderness of Maasai Mara with actor Isha Koppikar. travelandleisureasia.com/in/people/interview-with-actor-isha-koppikar-narang-about-her-wild-adventure-in-maasai-mara-kenya/



DISCOVER
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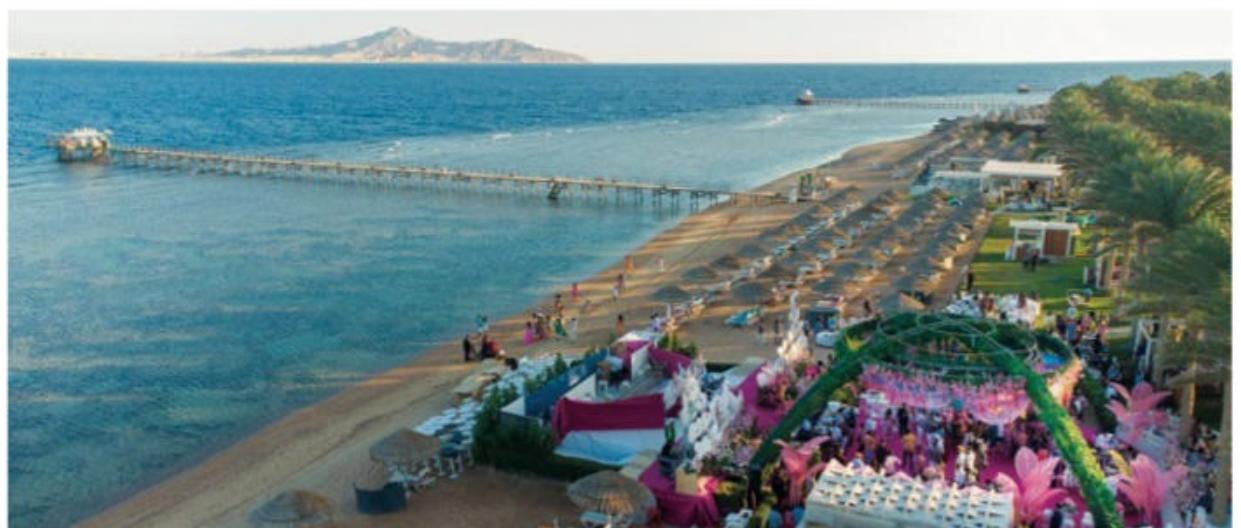
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Discoveries

A GLOBETROTTER'S GUIDE TO THE LATEST IN TRAVEL

10 DESTINATIONS FOR THE LOVESTRUCK

Whether you're planning your honeymoon or looking to rekindle the romance with your partner, this curated list has a destination for every kind of couple getaway. **BY ROOPLEKHA DAS AND SIMRRAN GILL**

1 Maldives

Who can resist the charm of azure waters, white sand beaches, and lush tropical surroundings, which characterise this stunning island paradise? Maldives is considered one of the most romantic destinations in the world for good reason. Enjoy utmost privacy in a far-flung island resort and soak in mesmerising sunsets with a bottle of bubbly and surreal views of the Indian Ocean from a private plunge pool in your over-water villa. With the concept of 'one island, one resort,' you have a whole range of options to choose from, be it luxurious hideaways or eco-friendly, sustainable getaways. Amp up the romance with private candlelit dinners by the beach, indulge in pampering at an underwater spa, set off on a sunset cruise, plan a private picnic on a castaway sandbank, or watch a movie on the beach under the starlit sky. [visitmaldives.com](https://www.visitmaldives.com)

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2 Monaco

In Monaco, on the northern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, time truly stands still. With a favourable climate and spellbinding vistas, the country has, over the decades, become a favourite destination, especially for couples. Think world-class hotels, luxury spas, private beaches, cocktails by the sea, and lush gardens. For those looking to rekindle romance, the Principality is the perfect destination. From going on leisurely walks in one of the stunning gardens to savouring the finest cuisine, there is plenty that you and your partner can engage in here. And in case you needed any more reasons, Monaco also is home to the biggest hotel wine cellar in the world. In Monaco, you lose yourself in time but find yourself in love. visitmonaco.com



3 Gulmarg

The crowning jewel of India, Jammu and Kashmir continues to remain a dreamy getaway for honeymooners. While the destination in its entirety is perfect, Gulmarg stands out for its scenic beauty, snow-covered peaks, and a range of adventure activities. While old-school romantics can find joy in day-long picnics in the forests, adventure enthusiasts can opt for adrenaline-fuelled activities such as skiing, horse riding, trekking etc. And if you're the couple who likes to cherish the simple joys of living, there is the warm hospitality, an opportunity to visit the highest golf course in the world, the majestic views of the Himalayas, and frozen alpine lakes here. jktourism.jk.gov.in

Aahana - The Corbett Wilderness

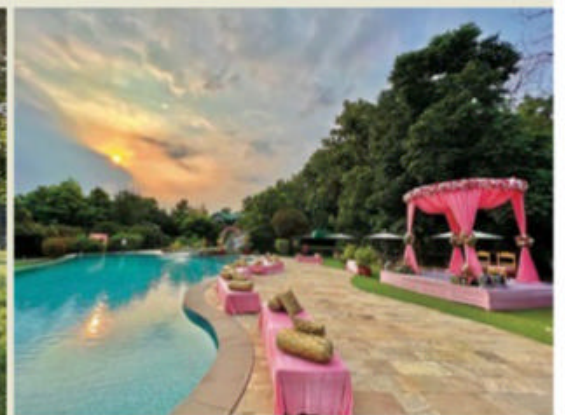
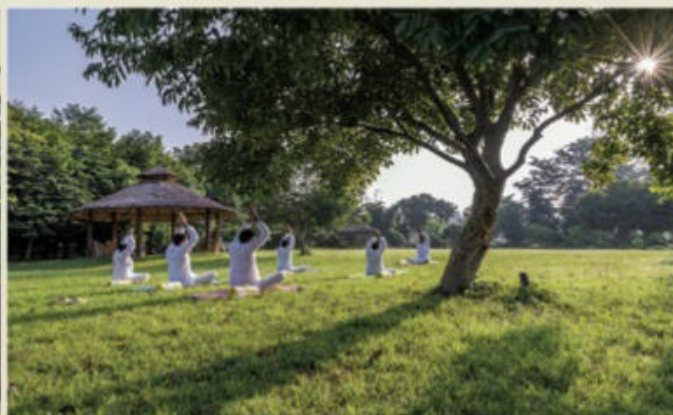
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4 Budapest

Imagine walking down a boulevard lined with glittering lights or experiencing the first rays of the sun on a quiet hilltop with the view of the Danube. If you find these fascinating, the Budapest must be on your bucket list. With cobblestoned medieval streets, magnificent art nouveau facades, and neo-gothic landmarks, Budapest's fairy-tale cityscape awes couples with its blend of old heritage and cosmopolitan vibe. Rejuvenate at Széchenyi Thermal Bath, which is famous for its spas or spend a romantic evening at Magyar Állami Operaház or Hungarian State Opera. From the Aquincum, Royal Palace, and the Tomb of Gül Baba (Gül Baba türbéje) to the more contemporary Budapest Palace of Arts (Müpa) and art galleries displaying avant-garde paintings, Budapest is ideal for an oh-so-dreamy getaway. budapestinfo.hu



5 Zermatt

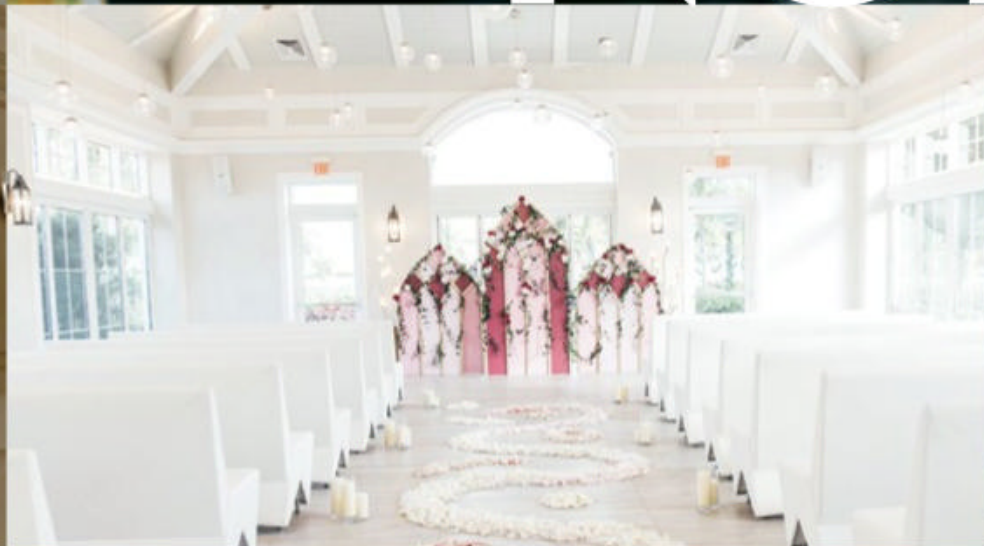
Switzerland has typified romance in Bollywood movies, and is perfect for a romantic rendezvous with its glacial lakes, fine chocolates, snow-capped Alps, and postcard-perfect towns. However, the ski resort town of Zermatt, with its freshly powdered ski pistes and the majestic Matterhorn framing it makes for an ideal romantic getaway. Preserving its original character till date, Zermatt is well suited for both summer and winter holidays. Visit the Matterhorn Glacier Paradise; the peak lift takes you up to the 360° viewing platform. The view from here is sure to give you goosebumps. Wander the pretty streets at night and stop by for a fondue dinner in one of the many restaurants. Or just cuddle up with your partner on a sunny terrace and enjoy the view of the most distinctive mountain in the world. zermatt.ch



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6 Sharm El Sheikh

Located on the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula, Sharm El Sheikh is an Egyptian city whose proximity to the desert lends it an air of mystery and romance. If you and your partner are adventure junkies, this is the place to be. Go diving, snorkelling, or scuba diving in the Red Sea; there are also options for sailing, wind and kite-surfing, sky diving, or parachuting from a helicopter. With sandy toes and a great tan, make your holiday in Egypt an unforgettable experience by exploring magnificent coral reefs and some of the best diving destinations in the world such as Ras Mohammed National Park. You can bathe in the sun or cool down in the warm waters all year round. Turn your holiday into a pampering one by heading to a luxurious couple spa. From lavish hotels and resorts to individual villas, beach houses and budget apartments, there is a lot to choose from in the Hadaba area that is far away from the madding crowd. egypt.travel

7 Cancun

Laid-back vibes, plenty of resorts, and an adventurous nightlife—what's not to love in Cancun? Situated on one of Mexico's easternmost points, Cancun's Hotel Zone or the Boulevard Kukulkan, where one finds the city's all-inclusive hotels, overlooking the coast along with several private stretches of sand, is the perfect choice for that uninterrupted time with your partner. The downtown area or El Centro dotted with markets and lined with traditional restaurants is where you'll get a chance to taste a slice of the local life. You can choose to stay at one of the many quaint hotels here too. With nearly 9,000 kilometres of pristine coastline and 10 Blue Flag beaches, Cancun is a tropical paradise to fall in love with your partner all over again. mexicancarribeantravel.com



SHUTTERSTOCK (2)



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8 Prague

Home to enormous palaces, chapels, and horse-drawn carriages, Prague has the potential to make anybody fall in love. Nicknamed the 'City of a Hundred Spires', Prague is home to Romanesque chapels and cellars, Gothic cathedrals, Baroque palaces and gardens, art nouveau buildings, and unique Cubist architecture. Beyond the clock, bridge, and the castle, there is so much more to explore! The finest way to experience Prague is on foot. Want to teleport yourself to the period of Mozart and Beethoven? Wander hand-in-hand with your spouse around the city's ancient bridges and neighbourhoods where you can hear buskers performing classical music. Spend your evening by the Vltava River, where you can savour one dish after another from the local farmers' and gourmet markets. prague.eu



9 Champagne

The first romantic city that comes to mind when you think of France is Paris. But there is much more to this fine country. For a romantic vacation, our pick is Champagne, two hours from Paris. The region recently made an appearance in the hit Netflix show *Emily in Paris*. Laced with history, the region beckons lovers not just for its eponymous wine, but also its stunning vineyards, wine tours, and warm people. While here discover the hillsides (Hautvillers, Haÿ, and Saint-Nicaise) and cellars (of brands like Pommery, Veuve-Clicquot, Ruinart) that were recognised as UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 2014, partake in canoeing at one of the six beaches of Lake Der, meet the winemakers, prepare a country basket for lunch in the vineyards, or simply go birdwatching at the pond of La Horre. in.france.fr



10 Istanbul

With the confluence of cultures, colours, and sounds, Istanbul provides a rich sensory experience that one cannot afford to miss. Surrounded by water, this transcontinental metropolis has an old-world allure and offers a myriad of romantic possibilities. Head to the Michelin-starred restaurants like Turk Fatih Tutak, Neolokal, or Araka with your loved one to relish a great meal. With its gorgeous ancient sites, bustling nightlife, festivals of art and music, and shopping arcades, Istanbul transports you to another world. The city has long shorelines as two large bodies of water—Marmara Sea and Black Sea—surround it; you can spend your time by the beach admiring the setting sun and indulging in the sweet art of doing nothing. visit.istanbul 🇹🇷



Where Luxury Awakens Your Senses

At The Ritz-Carlton, Doha, dreams come to life on a private island dotted with abundant luxuries. BY BAYAR JAIN

Located on a private island in the exclusive West Bay Lagoon district, The Ritz-Carlton, Doha is the ideal destination for couples looking to recreate lasting memories amid luxury. The resort brings holistic lifestyle experiences to the fore — from beautifully manicured lawns and exceptional recreational activities to creative cuisines.

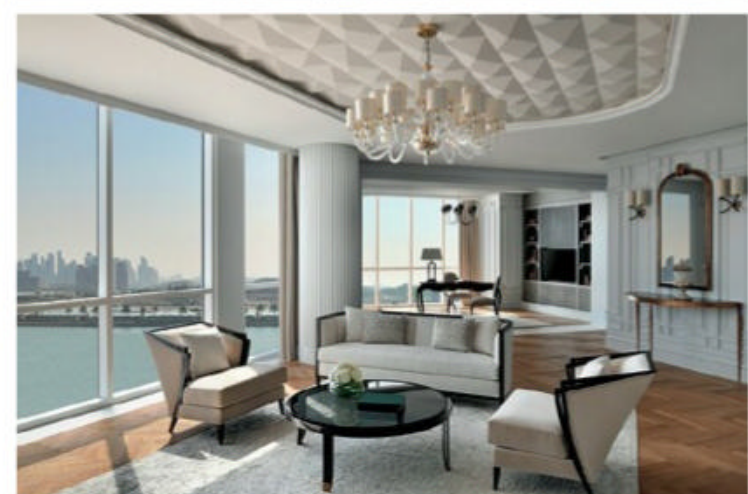
Exchange sweet nothings as the sun melts into the horizon of a private beach. Enjoy sweeping views of the Arabian Gulf, Pearl, and Lusail city. Or opt for romantic dining on the hotel's private beach. Plan a bespoke proposal, exchange vows amid fairytale wedding setups, and more.

This ocean-front five-star luxury city living is further accentuated by stylish

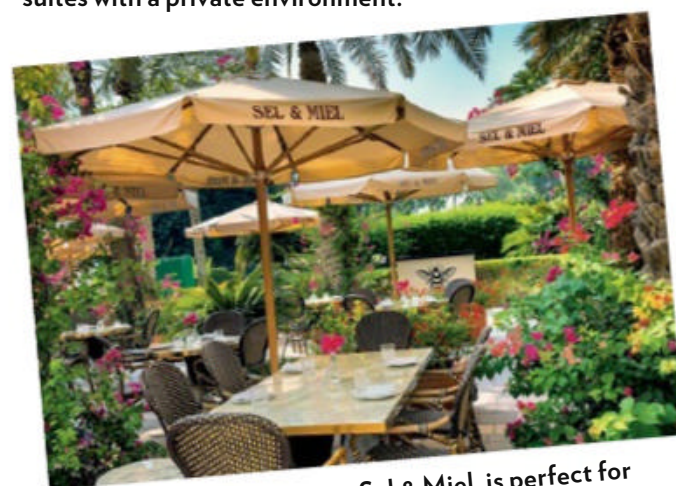
rooms and suites, an award-winning spa, extensive leisure facilities and culinary excellence. Designed for ample moments of leisure, The Ritz-Carlton, Doha is a refined space for pleasure seekers. Extend the magic of an unforgettable wedding with a honeymoon or fly in for an exciting couple's vacation. Snuggle together in comfortable sunbeds positioned on the private beach or unwind beside the lagoon-style freeform pools. More active couples can compete in friendly duels at the air-conditioned indoor squash and tennis courts. For complete rest and renewal, trust The Ritz-Carlton Spa Suite for moments of uninterrupted comfort, where world-class treatments can be enjoyed together in a private environment.



STK Doha is a glamorous steakhouse that serves high-end meat and rare cuts from around the world.



Clockwise from left: The lagoon-style freeform pools are perfect to unwind; B-Lounge serves Asian fusion fare against Doha's glittering marina; the property offers stylish rooms and suites with a private environment.



The French brasserie, Sel & Miel, is perfect for an intimate meal.

When here, reconnect with your partner over world-class dining options. The hotel offers a range of culinary venues where innovation meets Qatar's local culture. Savour an intimate dinner in the classic French brasserie Sel & Miel, get party-ready and head to the glamorous STK Doha steakhouse, or sample Asian fusion cuisine at B-Lounge, against the backdrop of Doha's glittering marina.

Making these stays even more memorable is the personalised service guaranteed by the welcoming team. Overseen by an expert team that appreciates the value of crafting individual experiences, the hotel is where five-star luxury meets a rare level of personalised service.

For more information, visit ritzcarlton.com/doha



◀ Glass Villa Goa boasts a contemporary exterior with a glass facade.

Beyond The Coastline

Lying in the picturesque village of Aldona, Glass Villa in Goa is an idyllic escape for those with a penchant for offbeat holidays.

AWAY FROM THE BEACHES, casinos, and parties, lies a lesser frequented Goa that is best experienced at Glass Villa in the picturesque village of Aldona. This peaceful hideaway comes with modern facilities while being surrounded by lush greenery, backwaters, paddy fields, and water streams.

With a contemporary exterior, wood and glass facade, laterite walls, and an exposed concrete ceiling, the property creates an idyllic setting.

Envisioned by renowned fashion designer Tarun Tahiliani, brought to life by architect Sameep Padora and Asahi Glass, and owned by entrepreneur and founder of The Rug Republic, Aditya Gupta, Glass Villa is the apt base for a rejuvenating Goan holiday. “The pandemic-induced boundaries created an unexpected romance with Goa for me. In December 2020, I went to Goa with an intention of buying a home. Took me a few trips to conclude that, but I

The property is surrounded by lush greenery and paddy fields. Right: Glass Villa was brought to life by architect Sameep Padora and Asahi Glass.

got the opportunity to explore Goa beyond the hotels and the tourist circuit,” says Gupta about the inception of the property.

While here, one can relish magnificent views of Aldona’s rolling fields and placid backwaters at the poolside cabanas and the sunken seats adjacent to the courtyard. And for enthusiastic bird-watchers, there are hornbills around the trees, blue kingfishers in the pool, tiny sunbirds hovering around, peacocks in the fields, and the occasional cormorant.

Glass Villa Goa is designed to offer an authentic experience, rather than a conventional holiday. On asking about the offbeat activities that one can partake in and around the property, Gupta says, “We are delighted to advise tourists on where to go for a taste of adventure and culture. One can opt for pursuits such as cycling tours, Aldona village walking tour, a refreshing kayaking adventure in the backwaters of Moira, and nature-centred excursions.”

This four-bedroom, two-storey villa lies an hour away from Dabolim International Airport, nearly 40 minutes away from the new Manohar International Airport, and about 40 minutes from Panaji. glassvillagoa.com —SIMRRAN GILL



Memories of a Lifetime

With mesmerising views of the Aegean Sea and luxurious offerings, Susona Bodrum in Turkey is an ideal destination for couples to tie the knot. BY SIMRRAN GILL



Clockwise from left: The infinity pool at Susona Bodrum; for larger gatherings there is Frankie Beach Club pier and L,X,R jetties; couples can choose a special room for their wedding night and avail various privileges.

Tucked away in the forests of Turkey's Aegean Coast, Susona Bodrum is the ultimate destination to celebrate your love. Located on a peninsula teeming with natural wonders on the turquoise Aegean coast, the property promises an unforgettable and luxurious wedding for those who want to go the extra mile.

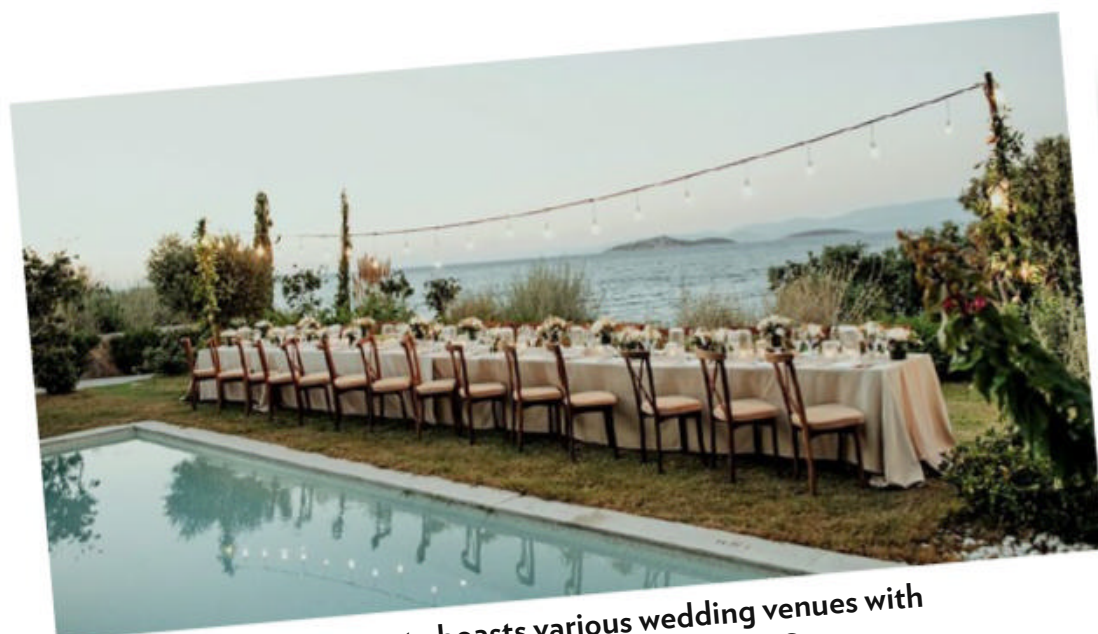
There are menus with award-winning and micro-local flavours, local wines from surrounding vineyards, and piers with view of the Aegean Sea, for your big day. At the property, the couple can also personalise the wedding experiences, opt for tailor-made wedding menus, and choose special accommodation options for their guests.

For those who dream of turning their wedding celebration into a gastronomic feast, there is Malva Restaurant that hosts weddings and dinners against the backdrop of the Aegean Sea. Here, the menu is updated every week based on fresh seasonal produce. And for a celebration larger than life, there is Frankie Beach Club pier and L,X,R jetties, which boasts high hosting capacity as well as unforgettable wedding ceremonies.

For the wedding reception, there is Talay Lounge, surrounded by a private pool and a garden. Featuring exceptional views of the Aegean Sea, your guests here can enjoy crafty cocktails and a tailor-made menu dinner.



And for a personal celebration, Susona Bodrum offers a special room to the couple for the wedding night, with various privileges such as airport welcome and farewell assistance, Lifestyle Host Service on call, packing and unpacking services, and sauna and steam bath at Spa by Spa Soul. Apart from this, the property also boasts elegant rooms, suites, and villas with modern in-room and indulgent bath amenities; connecting rooms; a full-service spa with personalised treatments and refined offerings such as a hammam, sauna, and relaxation areas; tennis court; indoor and outdoor pools; private cabanas; boat transfers and jetties; and a fitness centre for guests.



The property boasts various wedding venues with exceptional views of the Aegean Sea.

For more information, visit [hilton.com](https://www.hilton.com)



Celebrate Love in Singapore

Sofitel Singapore Sentosa Resort & Spa, a destination that blends Singapore's different cultures while paying homage to Sofitel's French origin, is the perfect place to rekindle romance. **BY SIMRRAN GILL**

SPREAD ACROSS 27 ACRES of lush greenery, and refreshed by gentle breeze from the South China Sea, Sofitel Singapore Sentosa Resort & Spa is the definition of Joie de Vivre, and offers world class amenities in its

211 elegant rooms and suites and four lavish villas.

If you're looking for a romantic escape with your partner, then Sofitel Singapore Sentosa Resort & Spa is the right destination, with curated stay and dining experiences this Valentine's Day.

Begin with soaking in the magical atmosphere at the outdoor palatial spaces and enjoying idyllic views of the South China Sea. Rediscover love in the company of Italian fare, prepared with fresh produce and sunset views of the South China Sea at The Cliff. Here, you can savour Italian flavours and sip on the finest wine from an

▲ *The property blends the French art de vivre and Singapore's local culture. Right: The Cliff offers authentic Italian fare along with finest wines.*



impressive selection of over 100 international labels. Couples can toast to love with an exclusive five-course menu. Begin the indulgent meal with a trio of antipasti, including the aphrodisiacal mermaid oysters and flavourful burrata and caviar. From there, choose from the wagyu striploin with black truffle jus or the fragrant roasted cod and cacciucco in a rich seafood broth. Finally, end the delicious meal with a raspberry *sakura* creme and strawberry *jello*.

For those who'd like to rekindle romance, there is the Romance Hideaway package, which is a wholesome experience with a rejuvenating stay, an hour-long treatment at Sofitel SPA, and a signature dinner for two.

Inspired by the iconic Paris' Jardin du Luxembourg, Sofitel Singapore Sentosa Resort & Spa boasts palatial outdoor gardens and copious water features. Each Sofitel draws inspiration from local culture and tradition while celebrating the French art de vivre. And the resort perfectly blends this cultural link through art installations around the resort—such as a life-sized bronze stallion statue symbolising the French and a majestic gold-plated lion statue that epitomises the local culture.

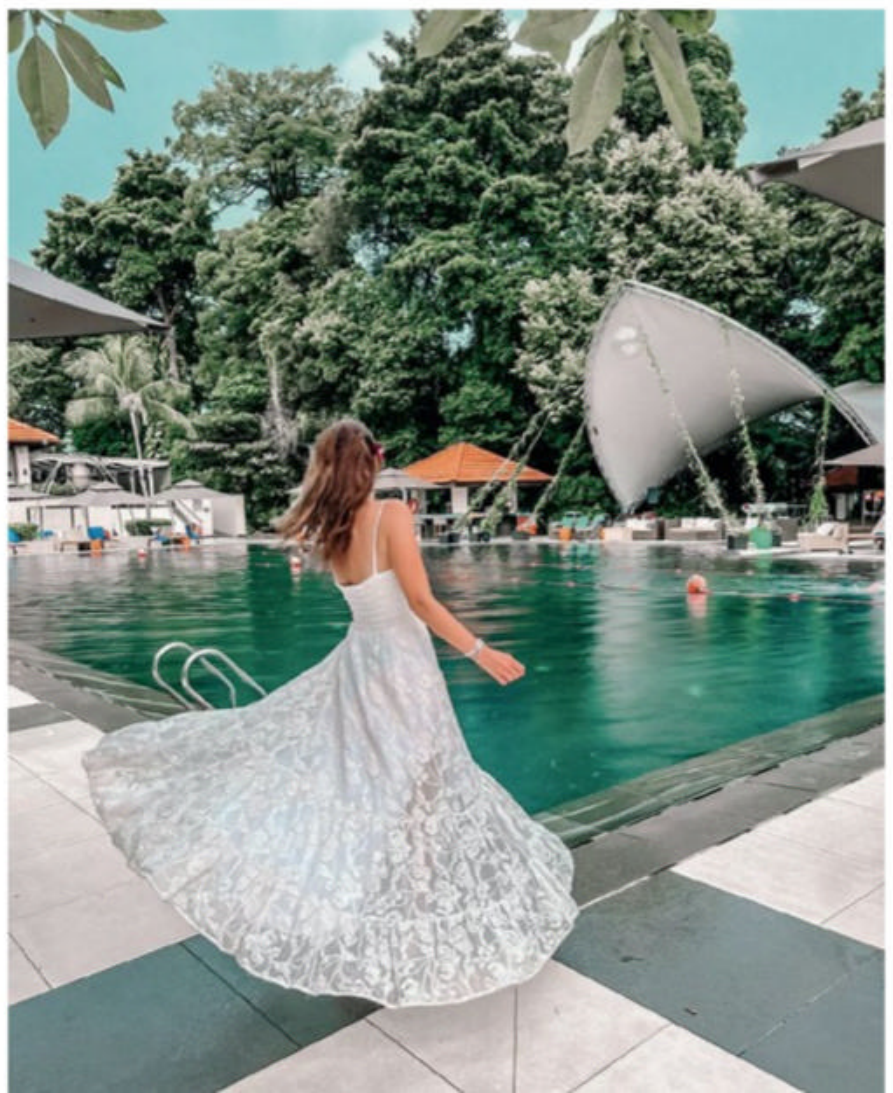
Amidst the culinary offerings, there is Kwee Zeen for a hearty breakfast including baked croissants, local delights, and house-made museli, all served with a side of French hospitality and with peacocks parading around the breezy al fresco area. For a tranquil afternoon, head to LeBar, an outdoor pavilion lounge at the heart of the resort. Cherish



▲ Indulge in the exclusive five-course meal at The Cliff. Below, from left: Sofitel SPA offers holistic treatments for the mind, body, and soul; one can also enjoy bespoke cocktails with serene views of Sofitel Pool.

the bespoke cocktails, dainty morsels, and indulgent high tea sets with serene views of Sofitel Pool with black pearlescent tiles glistening under the sun.

Unwind with your partner at Sofitel SPA which offers holistic treatments to revitalise the mind, body, and soul. sofitel-singapore-sentosa.com +



The properties are equipped to cater to both intimate weddings and large gatherings.



Love in Paradise

With a variety of venues and properties on offer, Paradisus by Meliá promises an unforgettable wedding against the most spellbinding backdrops in Mexico and Dominican Republic. BY SIMRRAN GILL



A baraat ceremony against the backdrop of the ocean.

A collection of luxurious nature retreats, Paradisus by Meliá promises a taste of the local spirit while creating unforgettable experiences through its service culture. The brand is also an ideal choice for big celebrations, especially weddings.

Whether you choose to tie the knot in Cancún, Playa Del Carmen, or Los Cabos in Mexico or at Punta Cana in Dominican Republic, the group's certified and experienced Romance Team will assist you every step of the way—right from the stages of wedding planning till the D-day.

Paradisus Cancún is set in an idyllic location between the Nichupté Lagoon and the Caribbean Sea, and boasts two spas, spectacular architecture, influences of Mayan culture, glass windows en suite, and exclusive services. The property has over 9,100 meters of innovative indoor spaces and exotic outdoor locations.

Paradisus Playa del Carmen, on the other hand, is a gem in the heart of Riviera Maya. Set in a mangrove forest near vast, white-sandy beaches, it offers rooms with sophisticated design, plenty of Caribbean sun, flavourful meals, and a choice of activities to introduce you



For mehendi, opt for a soirée with henna tattooing.

The wedding ceremony at Paradisus by Meliá can be customised to cater to the needs of the couple. **Right:** The brand offers outdoor and indoor wedding venues.

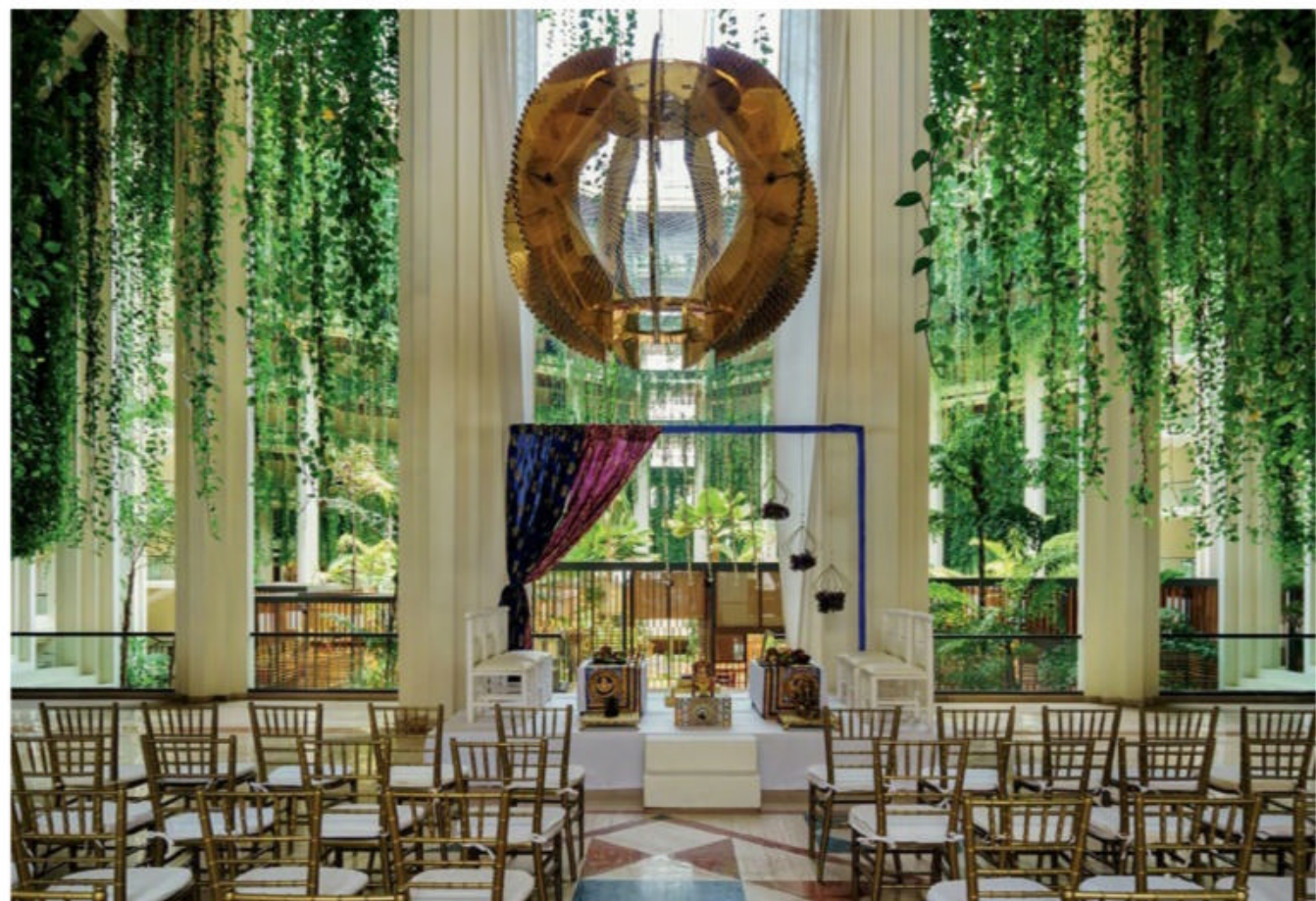
to Mexican culture. Boasting one of the best sunsets in the Caribbean, Paradisus Playa del Carmen is the perfect venue for a spectacular wedding. The property offers exclusive wedding packages, spacious and flexible event rooms, and gorgeous backdrops for those picture-perfect moments.

At Paradisus Los Cabos, there is a stunning beach, spa, all modern amenities, and views of the Sea of Cortés. If you choose to tie the knot at this all-inclusive luxury property, be assured of a dreamy wedding, an unforgettable honeymoon, and memories of a lifetime.

Paradisus Palma Real Golf & Spa Resort in Punta Cana is located on Bávaro Beach, surrounded by lush tropical gardens. Presided over by the Plaza Colonial, and its 12 restaurants, Paradisus Palma Real can host weddings and meetings in versatile spaces for up to 1,400 people.

Well suited for those who love luxury and the essence of the Caribbean, it offers the perfect setting for your big day. Think turquoise waters, white sand, beautiful fountains, exotic gardens, and unique corners for incredible experiences. There is a special Bridal Suite for the lady of the day.

All the properties are equipped to cater to both intimate weddings and large gatherings for a lavish celebration.



Not only this, but various functions such as *mehendi*, *sangeet*, *baraat*, and the wedding ceremony can be customised to cater to the needs of the couple and their family.

For *mehendi* and *sangeet*, opt for a soirée with delicious food, singing, dancing, and henna tattooing. On the D-day, the groom can make a grand entrance, and a team of certified Romance by Paradisus experts will be there to help with organisation and to direct the marriage procession. And

for the big moment, think a romantic ceremony in a unique setting.

The fun does not end here. For a grand cocktail and gala reception, there is an exceptional menu curated by experienced chefs. There are Italian, Mexican, as well as Indian delicacies on offer. The properties also offer custom decor and tailor-made set ups for your big day. Additionally, to ensure everything runs smoothly and safely, there are Stay Safe Bridal Ambassadors who are present to ensure all protocols are in place.

For more information, visit [melia.com](https://www.melia.com)



Two grand staircases adorned by Arabic motif railings at The St. Regis Abu Dhabi. Above: Herb baked oysters at Catch at St. Regis.

New Level of Luxury

Embark on a journey filled with opulence at The St. Regis Abu Dhabi, the vanguard of boutique lifestyle experiences in the emirate.

LOCATED NEAR BOUTIQUES like Hermes, Cartier, and Lanvin—and adjacent to the Nation Towers Mall—The St. Regis Abu Dhabi is ideal for an extravagant stay amid the city's finest spots. Indoors, architectural splendour awaits. The manor, houses handcrafted artworks and precious materials, from diamond-patterned floor marbles and Bohemian crystal chandeliers, to two grand staircases adorned by Arabic motif railings accentuated by diamond crystals.

This artistic beauty extends further to the guest rooms and suites here. Picture unique artworks, lavish textiles, marbled bathrooms, exclusive Arabic motifs, exquisite wooden furniture, and floor-to-ceiling windows opening to an unobstructed city and sea view. Add to this the in-house Nation Riviera Beach Club that houses a temperature-controlled swimming pool, Jacuzzi, pool bar, 200-metre pristine beach, a gym furnished with the latest Technogym equipment, and a children's retreat called Treasure Island. To relax, head to the Remède Spa where tailor-made treatments using premium products from Elemis and La Valle, delivered by professional and certified Balinese therapists awaits.

At Azura Panoramic Lounge, enjoy Mediterranean flavours and an unobstructed view of the Corniche. The Crystal Lounge enlivens St. Regis' signature Afternoon Tea featuring 30 different selections of premium tea and 15 varieties of honey, while The St. Regis Bar helps



The opulent St. Regis Abu Dhabi promises an extravagant stay amid the city's finest spots.

Abu Dhabi Suite is the world's highest suspended suite.

unwind over signature beverages and a collection of cigars. The all-day dining restaurant, The Terrace on the Corniche, satiates cravings with hearty breakfasts, themed nights, and a Saturday brunch. At the beachfront Cabana Beach Bar & Grill, savour scrumptious dishes and delightful beverages, while traditional flavours of Tuscany, Umbria, and Emilia-Romagna come alive at Villa Toscana. For caviar sturgeons, oysters, sushi, and crabs, don't miss to visit the Michelin selected Catch at St. Regis restaurant by the beach.

While the hotel's helipad is graced by personalities looking to enjoy curated canapés, sandwiches, and pastries accompanied by a vast collection of loose-leaf teas and premium beverages, Exquisite Spa in the Sky by Remède Spa offers relaxation at The Abu Dhabi Suite, the world's highest suspended suite. This experience is heightened by tailor-made treatments, exclusive use of the suite's Jacuzzi, sauna and steam room, a three-course dinner at the Grand Majlis, and a VIP luxury ride to and from any desired location in Abu Dhabi. stregisabudhabi.com

—BAYAR JAIN



Japanese Jewels

In Japan, the traditional and contemporary come together to offer unique experiences to travellers. Whether you're touring the country with family or solo, there is plenty to do and see. **BY SIMRRAN GILL**



Be it a family vacation or solo trip, Japan is sure to delight. Celebrities Maniesh Paul and Avneet Kaur would agree. While Paul explored the country's offerings with his family, Kaur embarked on a solo trip to Tokyo, Wakayama, and Osaka. Amidst Japan's various offerings, there are also over 2,100 Indian restaurants that serve authentic north and south Indian snacks and meals.

The capital city of Tokyo is well-suited for a family vacation and boasts towering skyscrapers, contemporary design, latest technology, great urban infrastructure, and bustling streets. Don't miss Gompachi Nishi-Azabu, known for making an appearance in Quentin Tarantino's film *Kill Bill*. The area takes you back in time with its nostalgic atmosphere, fresh *soba* noodles, and tempura.

Solo travellers can visit SHIBUYA SCRAMBLE SQUARE, a new landmark rising to a height of about 229 m, with 47 floors of shops and restaurants, and an observation deck called SHIBUYA SKY.

The city of Osaka, home to delicious food and friendly locals, is located only a short train ride away from Tokyo. Your family is sure to love the Dotonbori-Tombori River Cruise, a 20-minute ride along a waterway, showcasing an all-new view of Dotonbori. However, the wow factor in Osaka is the Umeda Sky Building. Nearly 173 metres above the



Clockwise from left: Kaur at the observation deck of SHIBUYA SKY; tea tasting ceremony at Imperial Hotel is a unique experience; Kaur on the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage route; Paul and his family strike a pose at Umeda Sky Building; the Dotonbori-Tombori River Cruise is a 20-minute ride along a waterway.

ground, and with a 360° field of vision, it has a floating garden that opens to panoramic views of the city. Inside the building, there are retro street shopping options, multiple restaurants, an art museum, and much more.

The spiritual heartland of Japan, Wakayama, is home to some of Japan's most sacred sites as well as beaches. Well-known for the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage route, Shirarahama Beach,

Wakayama Castle and onsen baths, it is perfect for solo travellers as well as couples. One of the must visit places here is Japan's tallest waterfall—Nachi Fall, which is 133 m and situated inside a primeval forest. The waterfall is known for not just its natural beauty but is also worshipped as the dwelling of Shinto deity. Wakayama, truly, is full of extremely relaxing and fulfilling experiences.



Baa Atoll lies on the edge of the ocean, overlooking a deep channel.

The Dream Eclipse Experience includes a night in the Beach Bubble.

Tropical Passion

Secluded stay options and culinary delights make Finolhu Baa Atoll Maldives the perfect romantic getaway.

SITUATED ON THE Baa Atoll in Maldives—one of the 26 natural atolls in the Indian Ocean—Finolhu is renowned for its two-kilometre white powdery beaches that stretch out across four islands. Finolhu, meaning ‘sandbank’ in the local Maldivian language, is home to 125 private villas and four restaurants, and there are activities lined-up for all sorts of travellers, be it adventurous or laid-back.

Travellers looking for a private and romantic experience at the property can opt for the Dream Eclipse Experience that begins with a romantic dinner at sunset served by a personal butler. The experience includes an unforgettable stay in the Beach Bubble, which is the only bubble on a secluded beach in Maldives. There is an outdoor bathtub for a romantic soak, with the gentle sound of the waves on the private beach to keep you company. The Dream Eclipse Experience’s newly upgraded bubble has three connected bubble rooms with separate space for the bedroom, living room, and bathroom.



Two Bedroom Rockstar Ocean Pool Villa at Finolhu.

There is also the Rockstar Villa, spread over 460 square metres, offering complete seclusion. The villa boasts two spacious master bedrooms, an eight-metre-long infinity swimming pool, a private bar, bathrooms with bathtubs and outdoor showers, 40 inch flat-screen TVs, and your own overwater hammock. Ideal for families and friends, it also comes with a butler service and an exclusive buggy for guests’ private use.

Do not miss the special culinary venue at the property, 5° North. Situated on a special platform, which is exactly five degrees north of the equator, this destination dining experience is available for a minimum of two and a maximum of eight guests. One can choose to indulge in a romantic dinner or share a celebratory meal with friends and family with a set menu of their choice.

For further indulgence, the Fehi Spa has on offer a wide selection of holistic treatments for mental and spiritual rejuvenation. Embracing the concepts of nature, purity, healing, and harmony, the award-winning spa brings together the best of East and West. The property also has a hair and nail salon offering a full range of hair-styling treatments and make-up services. finolhu.com —SIMRRAN GILL





From far left: The Diwa Club by Alila is an enclave of privacy situated 300 meters from Gonsua Beach; enjoy a beautiful sunset with your partner by the pool.

Goan Romance

With a series of romantic offerings, Alila Diwa Goa vows to create unforgettable memories for you and your partner.

A LILA DIWA GOA IS tucked away amidst paddy fields and palm trees and blends contemporary amenities with local history. For an uber private experience, there is The Diwa Club by Alila. A resort within a resort, The Diwa Club by Alila is an enclave of privacy with only 35 rooms and suites. Here you can enjoy a separate pool, restaurant, and entrance, along with a personal host.

If you're looking to rekindle the romance with your partner, nothing beats Diwa by Design, an exclusive

experience designed for an intimate getaway with your loved one. You can stay in one of the spacious pool-facing rooms with a private balcony and set out on a gastronomical journey with unlimited food and drinks at any of the five restaurants—Bistro, Spice Studio, The Edge Tropical Bar and Kitchen, Courtyard Bar, and Vivo. The inclusions do no end here; there is a 90-minute couple's spa session at Spa Alila, shuttle service to and from the Gonsua Beach, 24x7 access to the gym and yoga studio, a 7 to 7 breakfast menu at Bistro, airport transfers to and from Dabolim Airport, and fun activities at Play Alila Kid's Club and Teen Zone, for couples travelling with kids.

The property also curates private dining experiences at a special rate. You can choose between a treehouse or a poolside cabana and enjoy a curated meal, where a personal butler will be present to assist you. alilahotels.com —SIMRRAN GILL

BEACH DREAMS

Set on Thailand's sparkling shores, Avani+ Khao Lak Resort offers various venues for a memorable wedding celebration.

WITH A DIVERSITY of landscapes ranging from ballrooms to beaches, Avani+ Khao Lak Resort makes for an ideal setting for Indian weddings. Think cocktails in a garden, pooja in a private Royal Beachfront Pool Villa, sangeet in a ballroom that can cater up to 350 guests, mehendi in a tropical garden, and finally the golden sandy beach for nuptials.

As for planning, there is a dedicated in-house wedding specialist to assist you in creating your dream day—right from designing an authentic Indian menu and a wedding cake to accommodation packages and decor.

And for those who would like to continue the celebration beyond the ceremony and reception, there is a range of activities for both the couple and family and friends. For instance, honeymooners can soak in nature's bounty and explore the unspoiled beaches and the unique coastline by foot, boat, bike, or in a wet suit. The couple can also unwind post the wedding with spa treatments. And for the culinary aficionados in the family, there is a local cuisine cooking workshop in one of Thailand's most acclaimed Michelin Guide restaurants. avanihotels.com —SG

Clockwise from right: Tie the knot on the golden sandy beaches of the property; set up for haldi ceremony; the beach makes for the perfect photo op.





Fairmont Jaipur blends Rajasthani culture with modern day comforts. Below: The hotel offers multiple and unique venues for intimate meals, a proposal, or anniversary celebrations.



Regal Charm

Built in the tradition of the region's grand Mughal palaces, Fairmont Jaipur offers the best in modern amenities while paying ode to the rich heritage of Rajasthan.

SITUATED IN THE lap of the Aravallis and at a distance from the city, Fairmont Jaipur is known for its palatial setting and regal charm. Layered with Rajasthani history and culture, the property gracefully combines the glory of yesteryear with modern day comforts. And these influences can be easily spotted in the 245 guest rooms and seven Imperial Suites.

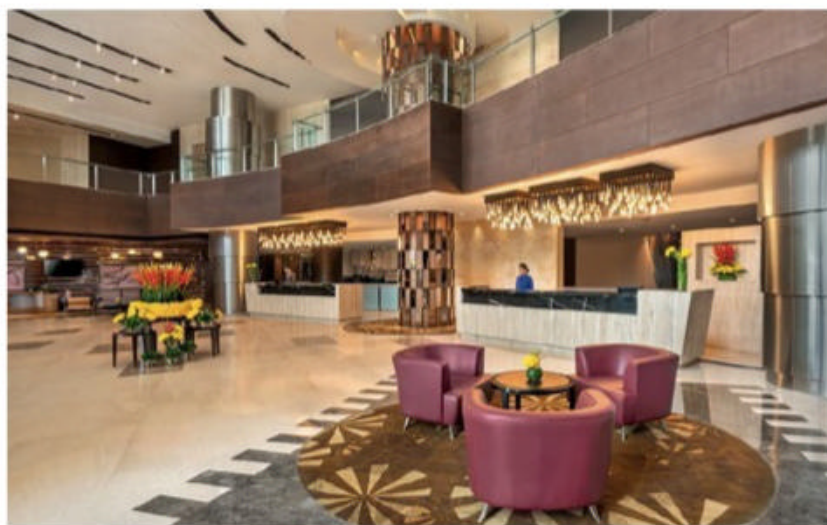
While the Signature Rooms have unparalleled views the Aravali Hills, with the spa and the outdoor pool in the foreground, the lighting of Deluxe Rooms has been inspired by traditional diya lamps that were used during the Mughal era. The property is one of the top choices in the country for weddings. Whether it is an intimate celebratory meal, a proposal, or an anniversary

celebration, the property's multiple and unique venue options make it a celebration of a lifetime.

For those who like to go the extra mile, there is Fairmont's unconditional all-inclusive option including upscale dining, live entertainment, premium spirits, and opulent lodging in a cosy atmosphere. And for those who prefer the simpler joys of life can unwind by the outdoor pool, indulge in a therapeutic massage or get fit at their state-of-the-art Health & Fitness centre. Another gem that is not to be missed at the property is the Ruhab Spa that offers treatments according to your zodiac sign, based on healing activities suggested in the ancient vedas. fairmont.com/jaipur —SIMRRAN GILL

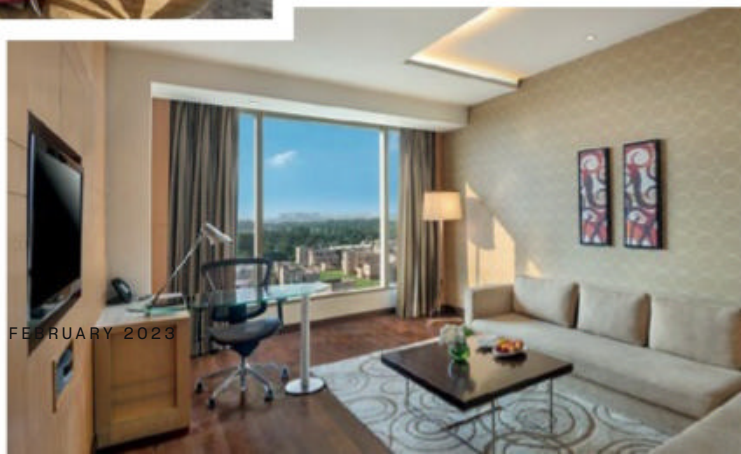
HOSPITALITY AT ITS FINEST

Tailored to cater to large events, the MICE segment, and lavish weddings, Crowne Plaza Greater Noida is a smart choice for business and leisure travellers.



Crowne Plaza Greater Noida is a premium luxury business hotel and is equipped to host large format conventions. Right: The property features 400 spacious rooms, including apartments and suites.

STRATEGICALLY LOCATED close to the corporate, industrial, and residential hubs of Greater Noida, Crowne Plaza Greater Noida is spread over nearly eight-and-a-half acres and is positioned as a premium luxury business hotel catering to corporate and MICE segments in Delhi-NCR. The property boasts 4,738 square metres of banqueting space with twelve options for meeting requirements. It is also equipped to host large format conventions,



events, and weddings with nearly 2,787 square metres of open-to-sky al-fresco event spaces.

Crowne Plaza Greater Noida features 400 spacious rooms including apartments and suites, and one of the largest spreads in the food and beverage space in Delhi-NCR, with a choice of Indian, European, Italian, and Chinese restaurants.

While Mosaic, the multi-cuisine restaurant, serves global delicacies in a relaxed, informal setup, Spice Art, serves a select menu from the Awadhi and Mughal kitchens along with popular dishes from Punjab and Delhi. For Oriental and Italian flavours, head to Chao Bella where you can see a pizza being baked or the woks being tossed in the live kitchen. And for bite-sized food there is Connexions, a chic and contemporary lounge. Belgian Beer Café gives an insight into the area's nightlife. ihg.com/crowneplaza —SG



The couple's massage room has a round bathtub to elevate romantic moments. Below: The property pairs the scenic beauty of Eastern Coast with spectacular views of Phang Nga Bay.



Cliffside Romance

Spectacular views of the Phang Nga Bay, and the luxury of space make COMO Point Yamu in Phuket an exciting and romantic vacation destination. **BY SIMRRAN GILL**

WITH MAGNIFICENT VIEWS of the Phang Nga Bay, COMO Point Yamu is one of the most romantic resorts in Phuket. Think scenic beauty of the Eastern Coast paired with spectacular views of Phang Nga Bay.

This sea-front property on the tip of Cape Yamu offers plenty of offerings well suited for a romantic getaway. For starters, you can enjoy an intimate

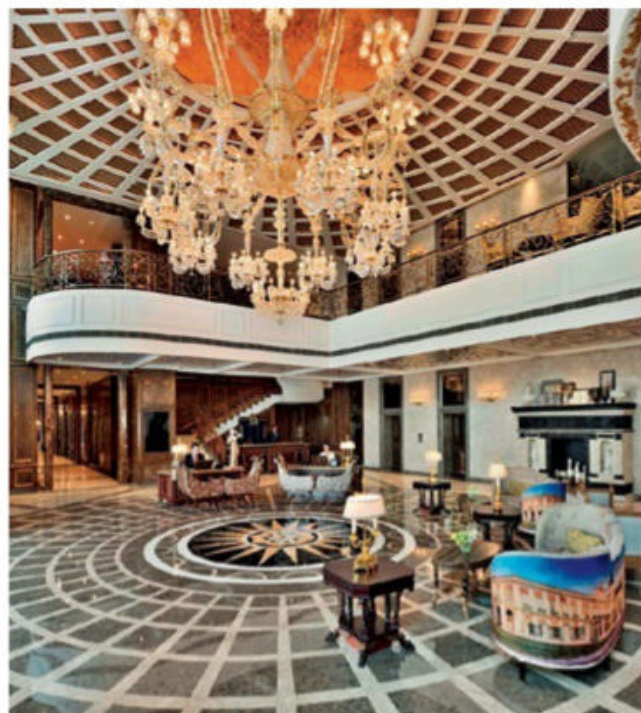
romantic dinner at a Private Dining Room, on the pool deck in your villa for heightened privacy. For couples who prefer meals with a view, there is Romantic Bay Dinner with tuna carpaccio, spiced apple *tarte tatin*, and vanilla bean ice cream.

For the ultimate relaxation with your partner, head to COMO Shambhala Retreat. An oasis to rekindle love, it

offers couples massages, a round bathtub to elevate romantic moments, and a full range of holistic treatments, in mosaic-tiled rooms overlooking the bay. COMO Point Yamu is also ideal for a clifftop wedding in Thailand—both intimate affairs as well as large gatherings. Here you can choose a contemporary setup, or one with traditional Thai ceremonies. comohotels.com/comopointyamu

CORPORATE BLISS

Located close to the business hubs of New Delhi and Noida, Radisson Blu MBD Noida offers an extravagant stay experience and multiple dining options.



SITUATED IN DOWNTOWN Noida, Radisson Blu MBD Noida is easily accessible by top businesses and corporate offices within the proximity of Noida and Delhi. The property is home to 131 lavish rooms and suites with premier amenities. Well suited for business as well as leisure travellers, the property also has the MBD Privé Collection that offers an extravagant stay experience in pastel-hued rooms with lavish interiors. Think personal butler, access to the Privé Lounge, signature aromas and amenities, and in-room technology that cater to personal specifications.

Amongst its culinary offerings are R.E.D—Rare Eastern Dining—which offers a creative twist on pan-Asian delicacies; Made in India that offers a taste of traditional Indian flavours in an opulent seating arrangement; SXVIII, the all-day brasserie with neo-classical interiors; The



The hotel offers MBD Privé Collection that offers an extravagant stay experience. Left: The property also has a large luxury banqueting space for business and leisure travellers.

Chocolate Box, for a quick bite; and @Links, which is the on-site lounge featuring array of wines and cocktails.

Additionally, the hotel has a large luxury banqueting space, five meeting rooms, state-of-the-art fitness centre, an outdoor swimming pool, and the Espace Spa offering soothing therapies. radissonhotels.com —SG



The Road Ahead

Hilton Garden Inn New Delhi/Saket is all set to revamp their offerings and services this year to ensure a comfortable stay for guests.

AFTER BAGGING MULTIPLE awards in the hospitality segment in 2022, Hilton Garden Inn New Delhi/Saket is all set for growth in 2023 as well. “We can already witness the [rise in] physical MICE [events] and weddings pan-India and are keeping our fingers crossed for more as we move further into 2023. We are also keen to witness the upcoming budget, which can further boost the prospects of the Indian hospitality sector,” says Joyjit Chakravorty, general manager of the property.

Situated at a premier location in South Delhi, Hilton Garden Inn New Delhi/Saket has a planned series of changes to their product and services in a phased manner. The property will soon upgrade to an all-new system of digital keys that will enable a smooth check-in and check-out for guests.

The hotel will also test some new flavours in the F&B space. For starters, there are Asian Nights, which will offer a decadent Asian buffet every Wednesday at the restaurant India Grill, with executive chef Vineet steering the operations. Think *char kwey teo*, nasi goreng, satay, pad-Thai noodles, *gado gado*, *som tom*, and more. There will also be fusion Asian delights based on the theme of East meets West featuring lettuce wraps, Asian chicken wings, Chinese egg tarts, fish pepper steak, kung pao tacos, and more. One should also keep an eye out for the property’s plans in the F&B space on Valentine’s Day. hilton.com —SIMRRAN GILL

▲ The hotel offers a special Asian buffet every Wednesday. Top: The property bagged multiple awards in the hospitality segment in 2022. Left: The hotel has special offerings in the F&B space for Valentine’s Day.

LOVE IS IN THE AIR

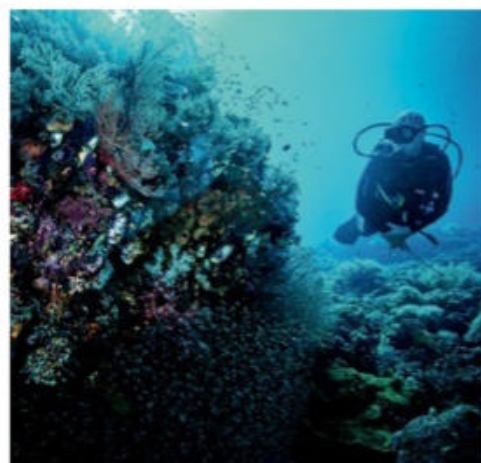
Tilar Silo Andamans promises an unforgettable getaway with lush surroundings, exceptional views of the ocean, and warm hospitality.

LOCATED ON THE secluded Vijaynagar Beach on Havelock Island, Tilar Siro Andamans is an ideal destination for an enchanted holiday, surrounded by the cerulean sea, marine life, and wetland forests. Nestled in a rainforest, the property offers exceptional views of the ocean and draws its name from the original inhabitants of the Andaman archipelago—the Great Andamanese Tribe—who referred to the island as ‘Thi-Lar-Siro’, which translates to ‘the land emerging from the sea’.

The property’s 25 rooms on stilts, overlooking the pool and coconut groves, follow CGH Earth’s ethos and exude warmth and understated elegance. Whether you’re within the

confines of your room, at the open-air deck, pool, restaurant, or lounging spaces, be assured to get a taste of the tropical surroundings and unblemished beauty of nature.

One of the highlights of the property is the fresh seafood on the menu, along with regional and international cuisines. As for the activities, one can explore corals and life underwater, go for a guided birding tour, trek through the jungle, opt for a kayaking expedition, go on a sunset cruise, unwind at the pristine beach, or savour a romantic dinner with your partner. The resort also offers guided intertidal walks through the shallows that opens a magical world of flora and fauna. cghearth.com —SG



▲ The property is nestled in a rainforest and boasts exceptional views of the ocean. Left: Tilar Silo has plenty of activities on offer, including underwater exploration.

Travel + Leisure
India & South Asia

The Intelligent Traveller

TIPS AND TRICKS TO HELP YOU TRAVEL SMARTER

20 HOT & TRENDING WEDDING VENUES AROUND THE WORLD

Imagine walking down the aisle in a restored medieval village in Italy or hosting a reception in an underwater wonderland surrounded by marine life. Here's a handy guide to the dreamiest venues in India and abroad to help kickstart your wedding preps. **BY SHRIMAYEE THAKUR**

Atlantis, The Palm, offers once-in-a-lifetime experiences, and has breathtaking wedding venues.

1. Fairmont Jaipur, India

A popular tourist destination because of its rich culture and cuisine, the Pink City also plays host to many destination weddings every year. Built to emulate grand Mughal palaces, Fairmont Jaipur is the ideal venue for a dreamy wedding. Grand murals, vintage Shekhawati furniture, gorgeous chandeliers, and the Mughal architecture of the hotel bring back the opulence of a bygone era for the perfect fairy-tale wedding. A variety of venues, such as the lush 'Charbagh' and a sprawling staircase outside The Grand Ballroom, ensure that no matter the size and requirements of your gathering, the hotel can accommodate your needs. The hotel also has an on-site team of wedding specialists to help plan your special day, along with catering services that provide everything from classic menus to contemporary cuisines. *Price on request; fairmont.com*

2. Al Bustan Palace, A Ritz-Carlton Hotel, Oman

Nestled in a green oasis overlooked by the Al Hajar Mountains, Al Bustan Palace, A Ritz-Carlton Hotel, is a beachfront property offering sweeping

views of the Gulf of Oman. This palace-turned-resort combines traditional elements, like the domed ceiling and inlaid walls in its lobby, with modern amenities for a truly royal experience. Although the Sultanate does not allow wedding ceremonies on the property, the former palace offers an array of exquisite venues for your reception, including the largest ballroom in

Muscat which can host 2,000 people, and a private beach for your bridal shower. A dedicated wedding planner oversees all the necessary details like flower arrangements, decor, catering and the cake, so you can focus on making memories that will last a lifetime with your loved ones. *Weekday packages start from ₹3,813 per person; ritzcarlton.com*



Al Bustan Palace is home to Muscat's largest ballroom equipped to host 2,000 people. Above: One can spot grand murals, vintage Shekhawati furniture, and Mughal architecture at Fairmont Jaipur.



Château Saint-Martin & Spa is wrapped in a blanket of greenery. Below: Phulay Bay in Thailand is located on the shores of the Andaman Sea, near Phi Phi Island.

3. Château Saint-Martin & Spa, France

This Oetker Collection Hotel in the French Riviera is surrounded in a blanket of greenery that stretches out as far as the eye can see. Boasting of a history spanning nine centuries, Château Saint-Martin & Spa was a Knights Templar Commandery in the 12th century. Today, a piece of that history still stands in the form of the Saint-Martin Chapel. The chapel has a rare spiritual atmosphere for beautiful ceremonies. Your wedding brunch afterwards can be held on the terrace, with a panoramic view of the surroundings. All 52 rooms and suites in Château Saint-Martin & Spa will be reserved for your wedding party, and your meals prepared in their Michelin-starred kitchens. Indulge in a luxurious spa treatment at Spa Saint-Martin by La Prairie, which features a duo cabin for couples to bond while they relax. *Price on request; oetkercollection.com*

4. Phulay Bay, A Ritz-Carlton Reserve, Thailand

If your dream wedding is to get married surrounded by clear blue



water and white sand beaches, look no further than Phulay Bay, A Ritz-Carlton Reserve in Krabi. An amalgamation of nature and culture, this five-star resort in Thailand sprawls across the shores of the Andaman Sea, near Phi Phi Island. Luxurious amenities, villas, and Thai cultural

experiences come together with flawless in-house wedding planning for a stunning ceremony. The property has several beachfront venues near Phuket, as well as a candlelit Thai pavilion where couples can exchange vows and receive traditional blessings from monks. Receptions can be



held in private dining venues and restaurants, with customisable venues to honour the cultural traditions of the happy couple. *Packages start from ₹2,21,416; ritzcarlton.com*

5. Castel Monastero, Italy

A beautifully restored medieval village and monastery, Castel Monastero is the jewel of the Tuscany region. Picture endless rows of cypress trees, chestnuts forests, vineyards, and corn fields—a green countryside for a rustic but chic wedding. Castel Monastero has 74 elegant rooms and suites and one villa to host your wedding party, and Contrada, a gourmet restaurant offering Tuscan cuisine to soothe hunger pangs. Organise your wedding in this 11th-century hamlet, which has a charming square surrounded by Medieval and Renaissance buildings, and a quiet church for a cosy setting

to your big day. You can opt to host an open-air reception in the square, or turn the restaurants into an elegant venue. A gorgeous suite, magnificent fireworks display, and

◀ Castel Monastero is an 11th-century hamlet surrounded by Medieval and Renaissance buildings. Below: Opt for a Signature Suite with views of underwater life at Atlantis, The Palm, Dubai.

an indulgent spa—Castel Monastero has all the ingredients to make your wedding unforgettable. *Price on request; castelmonastero.com*

6. Atlantis, The Palm, Dubai

Surrounded by the turquoise waters of the Arabian Gulf, Atlantis, The Palm is located on the famous Palm Island in Dubai. Combining luxury and unique, once-in-a-lifetime experiences, the property makes for a breathtaking venue for weddings. From intimate, cosy ceremonies to lavish events for up to 2,000 guests, Atlantis, The Palm will satisfy all your needs. Exchange vows on a private beach with your loved ones, or take it up a notch with an underwater wonderland where the marine life around the island bears witness. Work with a team of in-house wedding specialists to host grand receptions in vast ballrooms, or gorgeous outdoor locations, enjoy curated meals by world-renowned chefs and organise a luxurious stay for your loved ones in the resort's elegant suites. For some added sparkle, opt for a Signature Suite with views of underwater life. *Price on request; atlantis.com*



7. Kona Sea Salt Farm, Hawaii

The only salt farm on Hawai'i Island, Kona Sea Salt Farm sits on a shoreline and offers a breathtaking oceanfront venue and gorgeous sunset views. It combines the rustic charm of the farm with a traditional Hawaiian salt blessing for a unique and memorable wedding. Sea salt, called *pa'akai* in Hawaiian translates to 'solidifying the ocean', and has had many spiritual and practical uses for native Hawaiians. The blessing celebrates the union of two souls, and is a powerful way to begin your journey as a married couple. The property offers two packages for intimate weddings—a sunrise ceremony or a sunset ceremony—with 25 guests, or a package for over 125 guests (price on request). The venue is 'Ohana Lanai, with a spectacular view of the ocean and seasonal whales. konaseasalt.com

8. Angama Mara, Masai Mara National Reserve, Kenya

A remarkable safari lodge perched on the edge of The Great Rift Valley, Angama Mara gets its name from the Swahili word for 'suspended



in mid-air'. Two intimate camps of fifteen tented suites each, a private airfield and access to the Mara below, customisable safaris, and a famously warm Kenyan welcome await you at the resort. Whether you want a classical ceremony or a traditional Maasai blessing, the Angama Mara team will curate for you a perfect,

simple, elegant ceremony with hints of Maasai culture, rows of Kenya's famous roses, and a fantastic view of African landscape. Their customisable wedding itinerary includes safaris, massages, hot-air balloon rides on the morning of your wedding, and a forest barbeque. *No cost for venue hire, tented suites start from ₹1,21,451; angama.com*



Angama Mara is a safari lodge located on the edge of The Great Rift Valley. Above: Kona Sea Salt Farm is the only salt farm in Hawai'i Island.

9. Fattoria di Larniano, Italy

An exclusive village steeped in history, Larniano was earlier known as Lariniano, and is mentioned in a document of the City of Volterra dating back to 906 AD. The quaint village has several ancient farmhouses, lovingly restored as apartments and poolside villas, all with gorgeous vintage furniture; an Etruscan tomb; a picturesque tower from the year 1,000; and Roman remains. A wedding



The Garage is located within Singapore's first UNESCO World Heritage Site, Singapore Botanic Gardens. Above: The garden and orchard at Fattoria di Larniano can accommodate up to 80 seated guests for an intimate affair.

in the Tuscan countryside, surrounded by vineyards, olive groves, and total silence, is sure to be magical and intimate. The garden and orchard here can accommodate up to 80 seated guests, or 200 guests standing for an aperitif or cake-cutting ceremony. An old, converted wine cellar can accommodate up to 200 guests for a small reception party with your loved ones. They also offer a wedding planning service that covers catering, flowers, music, and photography. Select exquisite beverages from their own wine list to pair with the scrumptious Tuscan cuisine. *Price on request; larniano.it*

10. The Garage, Singapore Botanic Gardens

Located within the Singapore Botanic Gardens, Singapore's first UNESCO World Heritage site, The Garage is a multi-concept F&B destination, and is a unique venue for your special day. A verdant oasis of flora and fauna will surround you while you exchange vows in a heritage building steeped in rich colonial history. Get married in a pillar-less indoor dining hall or an outdoor air-conditioned patio, with a gorgeous view of the lush gardens as the backdrop. Your wedding brunch will be a gastronomical adventure at Botanico, the in-house restaurant and

ITC Grand Goa has three wedding venues and direct access to the Arossim Beach. Below: The Leela Palace Udaipur offers unparalleled views of the City Palace and Lake Pichola.

bar that serves European cuisine with Asian influences, and has botanical elements in its dishes and cocktails. Floral arrangements and wedding decorations will be taken care of by The Garage. *Price on request; thegarage.sg*

11. ITC Grand Goa, India

Hidden away in a pristine spot in south Goa, ITC Grand Goa offers direct access to the Arossim Beach, and spans across 44 acres, with three wedding venues to choose from and a dedicated team to customise every detail of the experience, including food, décor and music. The Seaside Lawns is the quintessential beachfront venue, popular with couples wanting to tie the knot surrounded by the sun and sea, and able to accommodate up to 750 guests. For a more serene setting, choose the Magical Forest, a tropical



garden with swaying pine trees and chirping birds, which can host up to 400 guests. If you prefer an indoor wedding, the resort has four venues that can accommodate anywhere from

30 to 350 guests, and personalised according to your requirements. *Price on request; itchotels.com*

12. The Leela Palace Udaipur, India

Located in a city known for its splendour, The Leela Palace Udaipur upholds the grand legacy of the Mewars, utilising intricate embellishments and traditional artisanal crafts that are influenced by Rajasthan's rich cultural heritage. Unparalleled views of the City Palace, the imposing Aravalli mountains, the glittering waters of Lake Pichola, and luxury fit for royalty await you at this lakeside resort. The banquet spaces in The Leela Palace Udaipur can accommodate as many as 200 seated guests, with additional space for 100 standing guests outdoors. For an intimate ceremony with just your closest loved ones, opt for a private room which can host up to eight guests. Arrangements can also be made for external venues, such as the Jagmandir Temple on a tiny island across the hotel. *Price on request; theleela.com*





13. Alila Villas Uluwatu, Indonesia

If exotic weddings are more your speed, plan your wedding at the Alila Villas Uluwatu, set in a tropical landscape. Foray into the intricacies of Bali's culture with traditional Balinese song and dance while you wait for the big day, and enjoy intimate access to three of Bali's lesser-known temples to seek blessings. Thoughtfully curated wedding packages at the hotel cover everything from intimate hilltop ceremonies for 12 guests and cliff-edge

cabana weddings for 30 guests to lavish 400-guest affairs with exclusive access to the resort for two whole days. The efficient wedding planning team at the hotel will take care of the smallest details, leaving you free to relax and explore this exquisite corner of Indonesia. *Packages start from ₹2,45,902; alilahotels.com*

14. Madinat Jumeirah, Dubai

Known for its various spectacular wedding venues across the world, Jumeirah is a name synonymous with

excellent service and unforgettable experiences. Madinat Jumeirah, one of the Jumeirah group's most iconic destinations, is located in one of Dubai's most picturesque sites, amid the Abra waterways, and boasts of the region's most diverse collection of venues—the contemporary Jumeirah Al Naseem, the palatial Jumeirah Al Qasr, and the boutique Jumeirah Mina A'Salam, as well as the exquisite summer houses at Jumeirah Dar Al Masyaf. Madinat Jumeirah offers various venues to suit every couple, including Fort Island, one of the largest outdoor event spaces in the UAE, with a capacity for up to 1,400 guests. The Joharah Ballroom has chic Arabian interiors, along with access to a charming water terrace, with space for 1,500 guests. For more intimate gatherings, the Majlis Al Mina, decorated in an arabesque style, can host up to 100 guests; while the refurbished Majlis Al Salam is ideal for up to 400 guests. *Price on request; jumeirah.com*



Alila Villas Uluwatu offers curated wedding packages for all sorts of gatherings. Above: Madinat Jumeirah is located amid the Abra waterways, and has a diverse collection of venues.



15. Riad Fès - Relais & Châteaux, Morocco

The erstwhile home of one of the most notable families of Fez, Riad Fès was a palace in the 14th century. It was restored to its original splendour as an ode to Moroccan traditions and to the thousand-year-old city. The epitome of old-world luxury with modern comfort, the property now helps guests explore the intricacies of local culture with traditional Moroccan culture combined with a baroque style. Their style, 'Contemporain'

utilises pops of colour and fine materials throughout the property. Its exceptional indoor and outdoor spaces can comfortably host up to 150 guests, while the in-house restaurant Gayza is perfect for intimate, romantic dinners for the couple. With four patios and a panoramic terrace, you have a wealth of options to choose from, whether it be exchanging vows under the magnificent brass chandelier in the Classic Patio, or a sunset celebration on The RoofTop. *Price on request; riadfes.com*

Riad Fès – Relais & Châteaux's in-house restaurant is perfect for intimate, romantic dinners. Below: Anantara Riverside Bangkok Resort's Trader Vic's Garden is an ideal venue for a tropical wedding.

16. Anantara Riverside Bangkok Resort

Easily accessible by a luxury shuttle boat, Anantara Riverside Bangkok Resort is spread across 11 acres of the west bank of the Chao Phraya. Offering an escape from the urban rush while not being completely cut off, the resort offers an immersive experience of cultural entertainment and theatrical culinary displays. No matter how large your party is, the resort's 281 guestrooms and 95 suites can easily accommodate your guests. An array of both indoor and outdoor wedding venues—such as Trader Vic's Garden, a charming tropical garden terrace; the Riverside Terrace which boasts stunning views of the Chao Phraya; and the Grand Sala with an al fresco banquet—can seat anywhere from 50 to up to 800 guests. *Packages start from ₹7,46,466; anantara.com*



Kumarakom Lake Resort combines local elements with regal luxury. Below: Host your wedding entourage in rooms with stone balconies at Villa Orsula Dubrovnik.



17. villa Orsula Dubrovnik, Croatia

Take in sublime views of the forested island of Lokrum, coupled with effortlessly chic interiors at the five-star Villa Orsula Dubrovnik. It is one of a collection of luxury hotels in Dubrovnik under Adriatic Luxury Hotels, and a mere five-minute stroll from the World Heritage site of Dubrovnik Old Town. Once the home of local noble family, the property has elements of contemporary design and an eclectic collection of aesthetic objets d'art throughout the property. Host your wedding entourage in rooms with stone balconies to admire the glimmering Adriatic Sea from. The property has a garden with wild orange trees and access to a private beach for quiet, intimate moments. For bigger celebrations, the hotel group offers the plush Mare Conference Hall, which seats 750 people, and award-winning Ragusa Conference Hall overlooking Cavtat with a capacity of 850, in its other

hotels in Dubrovnik. *Price on request; adriaticluxuryhotels.com*

18. Kumarakom Lake Resort, India

Touted as the finest luxury heritage resort in India, Kumarakom Lake Resort sits on the banks of the serene Vembanad Lake in Kerala, combining quintessential local elements with regal luxury. The breathtaking beauty of the 25-acre property is ideal for picture-perfect weddings, with multiple sumptuous venues to choose from. Glide into the gentle lake on a bedecked boat for a unique and unforgettable wedding ceremony, surrounded by up to 60 guests. For a larger party, the lush main lawn has the lake on one side and the gorgeous hotel on the other, with a capacity for up to 150 guests. Grand buffets or multi-course dinners can be arranged by the resort, along with florists, decorators and photographers for a seamless experience. *Price on request; kumarakomlakeresort.in*



19. Oberoi Sukhvilas Spa Resort, India

Enter a green paradise in the first planned city of India, with lush gardens, gurgling fountains, cool pools, and traditional architecture. Set against the backdrop of the Siswan Forest Range and Himalayan foothills, the resort has luxurious royal tents with private gardens or pools, and spacious villas with pools, in addition to premier rooms. The ceremony can be held at one of two venues—the Durbar Hall and Courtyard, with high ceilings and glass doors that open onto an al fresco terrace, with a capacity of up to 500 guests; or the spacious Anant Mahal Courtyard with a domed

gazebo at its heart to exchange vows in. A vast selection of culinary delights follows the ceremony, served piping hot by the efficient staff. *Price on request; oberoihotels.com*

20. Castle Leslie Estate, Ireland

Tie the knot in this magical corner of the Irish countryside, in one of the last great Irish Castle estates still owned by the founding family. Home to the Leslie family since the 1660s, Castle Leslie Estate underwent a major restoration programme and now invites guests to explore its 1,000 acres of Irish countryside, interspersed with woodlands and

lakes. Just 80 minutes from Dublin, the estate still offers the chance at a secluded, private ceremony surrounded by those closest to you. Choose from two unique locations for your wedding—the Castle at Castle Leslie Estate, full of old-world grandeur and able to accommodate up to 70 guests; or The Pavilion, which overlooks the Glaslough Lake and can accommodate 260 guests. Food is a particular point of pride and is presented with imagination and flair, with locally sourced ingredients. *Rooms at the Castle start from ₹19,970, rooms at the Lodge start from ₹16,844; sample menus from ₹6,294; castleleslie.com* +



Food is a point of pride at Castle Leslie Estate and is presented with flair. Above: Oberoi Sukhvilas Spa Resort is set against the backdrop of the Siswan Forest Range and Himalayan foothills.

*Dubai is full of
Insta-worthy places,
according to Jain.*

LOVE IN DUBAI

Be it the famous Burj Khalifa or the hidden souks, there is no dearth of picturesque locations in Dubai. **Shubhanshu Jain** of The Wedding Matinee introduces us to a few that are perfect to start your love story.

PULLENCE, LUXURY, and grandeur are some of the words that are synonymous with Dubai. So, if you are planning a larger-than-life wedding, here is some inspiration.

This is the love story of Niyati and Josh, who chose to say ‘I Do’ at a beautiful and opulent Indian wedding ceremony in Dubai.

“The bride’s family lived in Dubai and the groom was from the United Kingdom. The couple wanted to show what a real Indian wedding would look like to their friends and families who were travelling from all across the globe,” says Shubhanshu Jain, CEO of The Wedding Matinee. “They told us exactly what they wanted it to look like and what elements of the wedding were important to them. Most of Josh’s friends and family were attending an Indian wedding for the first time, and were super excited,” adds Jain.

As part of the couple’s wedding photography team, Jain visited venues that should be on every bride and groom’s list. Here are his favourites.

LUXURY FOR EVERYONE

Dubai is famous for its luxury and grandeur, and we were awed by every place we visited. Niyati and Josh’s wedding was a three-day



long affair. The nuptials started with a party and ended on the same high with another party. Most of the wedding functions were held in Lapita, Dubai Parks and Resorts, Autograph Collection (autograph-hotels.marriott.com), a big wide hotel in Jebel Ali. We began the first function with a welcome party that had a white and neon theme.

ODE TO BOLLYWOOD

The next morning began with an all-yellow and flowery *haldi* on the terrace, which was followed by a very colourful *mehendi*. The bride entered the *mehendi* venue with her *nani* and *dadi*. There were flash mobs and

surprise performances for the couple by their near and dear ones.

In the evening, we went to BollywoodParks™ Dubai (bollywoodparksdubai.com), a theme park based on famous actors and their iconic Bollywood roles and films. The evening ended with a cocktail and *sangeet* party at the grand ballroom in Lapita. Josh and Niyati joined the crowd dancing to the Bollywood track *tenu leke mai jawan ga* along with their bridesmaids and groomsmen.

THE EYE OF DUBAI

The wedding ended with *phas* and a reception at The Ritz-Carlton, Dubai (ritzcarlton.com), which is one of the finest luxury beach resorts in the world.



Niyati walking down the stairs of The Ritz-Carlton, Dubai, on her wedding day. Above: One of the quirky decor elements at the mehendi ceremony.



Clockwise from below: Dubai's souks are perfect for photos; La Mer Beach is home to quirky wall paintings and restaurants; the stunning couple at BollywoodParks™ Dubai.





▲
The varmala was held during sunset on the private beach of The Ritz-Carlton, Dubai.

The *varmala* was held during sunset on the private beach of the resort with the sound and view of the ocean in the background. The giant Ain Dubai or Dubai Eye (aindubai.com) lit up the evening sky and made it an unforgettable experience. The night ended with a grand reception. It was a musical extravaganza, with violin players welcoming the guests and a live band rocking the stage.

The beauty of the city is perfectly captured in a beautiful photograph of Niyati and Josh walking towards the *mandap*. As someone who is always looking out for good lighting and frames, I noticed the setting sun creating just the perfect ambience for Niyati and Josh. And that's the photograph turned out to be magical.

FOR THE LOVE OF INSTAGRAM

There are indeed a lot of Insta-worthy places in Dubai. The souks reflecting the golden sun, the shops that sell out with interesting patterns and rising smoke, and many more.

La Mer Beach (lamerdubai.ae) is one of the most Instagrammable spots in the city. With the quirky wall paintings, restaurants, and fairy lights, it is all about aesthetics, and a must-visit.

Dubai has made quite a lasting impression on me. Next time, I want to skydive above Palm Jumeirah Island (visitdubai.com). A tradition that I've followed on every Dubai trip, that I recommend is going to Downtown Dubai and walking around the Burj Khalifa.

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Dubai is one of the best options if you are looking for a destination wedding. Its many locations can match every vibe, and every wedding vision. A piece of advice to couples is to choose their vendors—decorators, planners, and photographers—wisely. Take your time, explore, and think well before you make these decisions. ✦

—AS TOLD TO ARPITA KALA



Sanjeev Kumar & Rikee Chatterjee

MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN

Fashion photographer Sanjeev Kumar and model Rikee Chatterjee fell in love after a coincidental encounter in 2009. The duo now lives together in Goa, and travels with their dog. Kumar talks to **ADILA MATRA** about their love story, travelling together, and favourite destinations.

How and when did you guys meet?

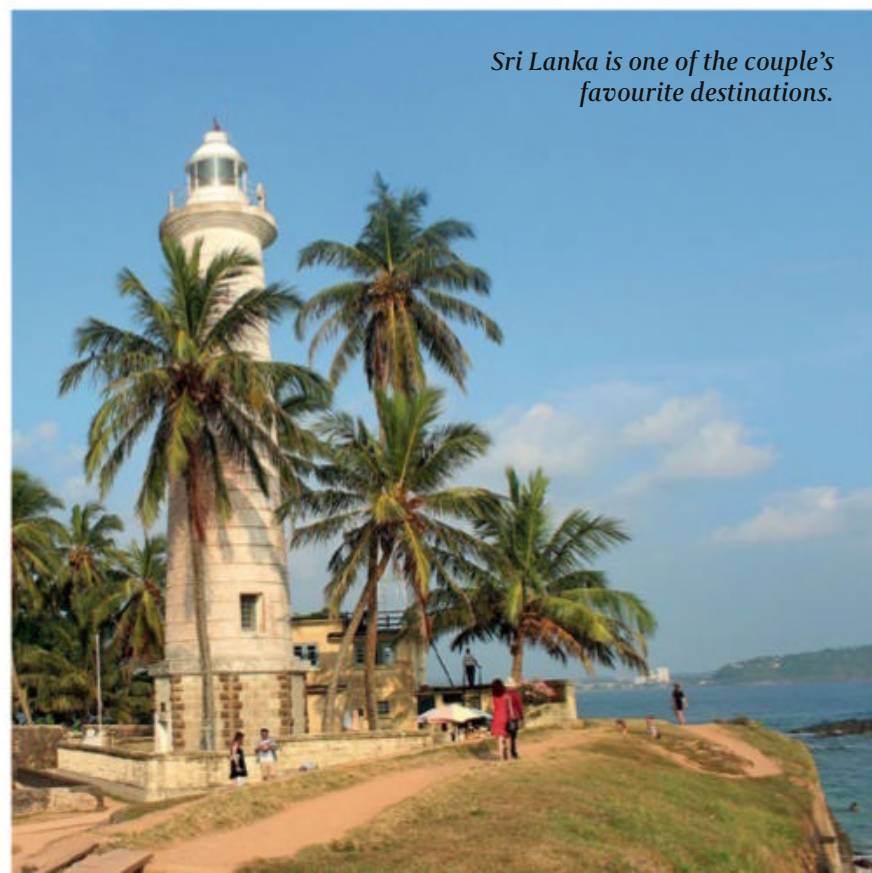
It was back in 2009, I was still modelling and she just started her journey in the fashion industry. Everything happened so quickly, it was just meant to happen. A day before one show, one of the models fell sick and was replaced by Rikee. That's when I got to meet her for the first time; there was definitely an instant spark between us. Luckily, she also lived close to my place and I would spend most of my time at her place; eventually we fell in love.

What is the best thing about travelling together?

The best thing about travelling together is that you get to share every moment with someone you love, and cherish it for the rest of your life. We were just lucky to find someone who is crazy, adventurous, and adaptable.

Which is your favourite among destinations that you have visited together?

Our favourite destinations would be Japan and Sri Lanka.



Sri Lanka is one of the couple's favourite destinations.



Kumar loves the culture and people of Japan.

What kind of travellers are both of you? How do you resolve differences while travelling together?

The reality of travelling together is not all that pretty and romantic. It comes with a lot of responsibilities and compromises. Our trips are mostly hectic but we thoroughly enjoy every bit of it. First, we sit down to do our expenses before any trip. It's split between us. For example, she pays for the flight and travel and I pay for the food and stay. We are pretty easy travellers with no big demand for a luxurious stay or commute. Both of us love to walk and taking local transport and experiencing everything the local way. Our main goal is to have fun and come back with happy memories.

What does a perfect vacation look like to you?

Considering we are quite crazy about travelling, our perfect vacation includes a lot of walking, exploring untouched places, trying out local food and culture, shopping, and sampling the local way of life.

Which is the most romantic city/place that you have been to?

It's definitely Japan! I remember when we visited for the first time, we were blown away by their art, culture, and traditions. I remember the walks to those cute little ramen shops in the night in the freezing cold and to the parks with beautiful Sakura trees. People in Japan are so humble, courteous, kind, helpful, and always happy.

I am totally in love with everything there.

Do you travel with pets? Which is the most pet-friendly destination you have been to?

Yes, we love to travel with our dog. Our favourite pet friendly destination has always been Goa, which is currently our home.

What are the destinations on your bucket list?

Honestly, we don't travel

to places that are trending on social media. Our travel bucket list is based solely on what we feel like and what our budget is. If that means we have to travel around India or by road, we would do that. I feel every destination is so vast and has so much charm and character that even one trip isn't enough so if have to travel back to the same place/country again, we would do that. Our journeys are always unplanned. ✚



The couple loves exploring the local way of life on their travels.



The couple travels with their pets.



◀ *The couple honeymooned in Turkey.*

five-hour drive from the city. And for our honeymoon, we went to Turkey.

What were the most unforgettable moments from these trips?

My most memorable journey was the one to Agra; Chaitanya proposed to me in front of the Taj Mahal, and it will be forever etched in my memory. During our bus ride from Delhi to Kasol, Chaitanya nudged me and exclaimed, “Abhishek, wake up! Take a look to your left!” I awoke to the Himalayan ranges and the Parvati River flowing by. The scenery was incredible. Another experience that I will never forget is the hot air balloon ride in Cappadocia, Turkey, where you get to see the entire city studded with castles. Pamukkale’s snow-like salt deposits were also an unusual experience.

Being a queer couple, what are some of the challenges you face while travelling?

As a gay couple or queer couple, we have not really encountered any difficulties. We were holding hands in Turkey, sharing a plate of food, and hugging. At one point, we were on a river cruise, and it was so lovely that we naturally ended up kissing. There were so many people on the cruise, yet I don’t think anyone pointed a finger at us. In fact, our tour guide became overwhelmed with emotions and willingly took pictures of us.

What kind of travellers are you? How similar or different are your interests?

When it comes to travel, we are polar opposites. I am a more organised packer and

Abhishek Ray & Chaitanya Sharma

FAIRY-TALE LOVE

Fashion designer Abhishek Ray tied the knot with his partner Chaitanya Sharma in a dreamy wedding in Kolkata earlier last year. In a freewheeling chat with **ROOPLEKHA DAS**, Ray talks about meeting his soulmate, travelling together, favourite destinations, and more.

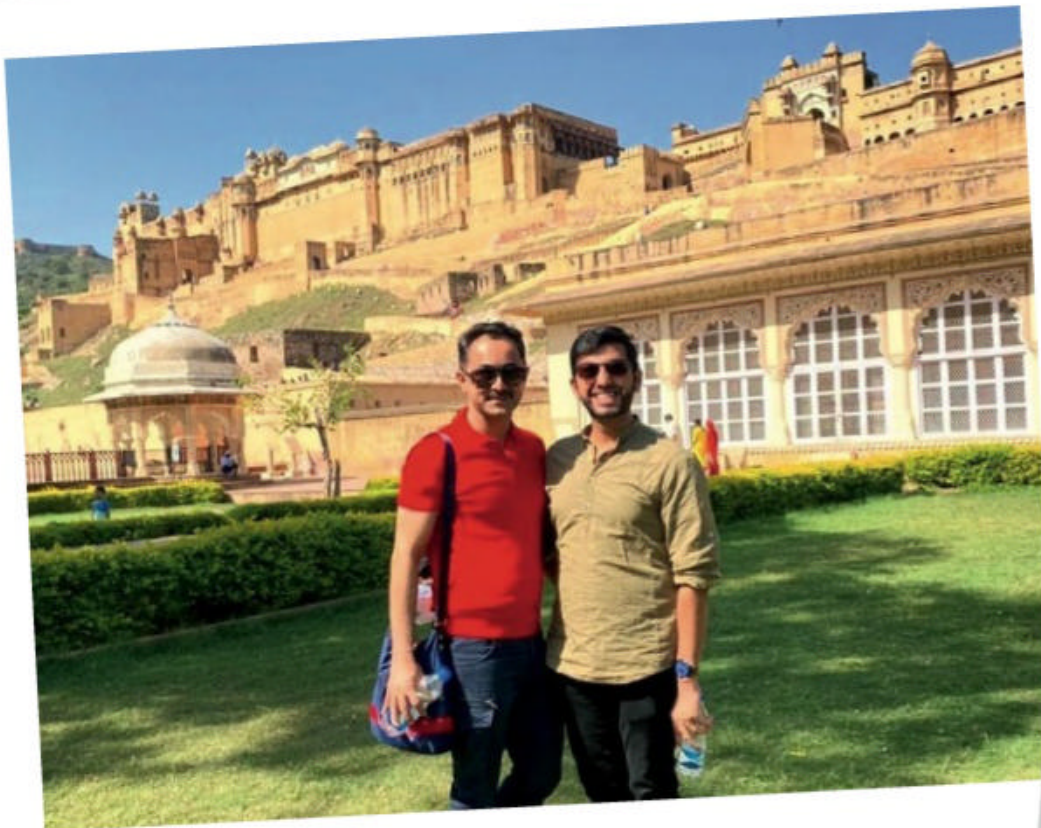
Where did you meet each other for the first time?

Facebook introduced us. Eventually, we exchanged phone numbers after getting to know one another. He flew down from Gurugram to Kolkata to see me for the first time on January 29, 2021.

What are the places you have visited together?

It has been two years of knowing each other and we have taken quite a few trips together. We travelled to Agra and Fatehpur Sikri on our first trip together. I am fascinated by history, so I wanted to see Qutab

Minar, Humayun’s Tomb, and other heritage sites. We visited Kasol, Jaipur, and Hyderabad too. We’ve also made a couple of short trips around Kolkata. There are some beautiful beaches such as Tajpur and Mandarmani that are not very crowded, and are a



The two of them are stark opposites when it comes to style of travelling.



The couple strikes a pose at Qutab Minar in Delhi.

will begin packing a week or ten days in advance, whereas Chaitanya will pack at the last minute. I'll write a list of everything I need to bring, take my medications, be extra cautious with the documents, and so on. When we went to Turkey, despite the fact that we had arranged foreign exchange and travel cards, and all of our expenditures were covered, I still carried some money because it was a different country. Chaitanya constantly encourages me to travel light, but I am a heavy traveller. I plan which jacket to wear with which jeans and how I should look, while he is pretty casual.

When you travel together, how do you resolve differences in interests?

Any obstacle in a relationship, in my opinion, is not insurmountable. Food has been one of the most challenging aspects of our relationship; he is a Marwadi and a devout vegetarian, but I am Bengali and can eat anything that flies, crawls, walks, runs, or swims. But I believe we have resolved that conflict quite strategically and maturely—we never force our food interests on the

other person. I am an avid foodie, therefore whenever I travel, I am constantly on the lookout for local cuisine, and trying out new things. However, he is quite particular about his food choices and doesn't tread out of his own culinary genre. He encountered numerous problems in Turkey, which is a non-vegetarian nation. My plate would be overflowing with

food at the dinner buffet, whereas he would be seated with a bowl of soup, salad, and some bread. However, we Googled and found a decent Italian restaurant because he enjoys vegetarian Italian.

Which has been the most queer-friendly destination you've visited?

In my personal experience, Turkey was incredibly

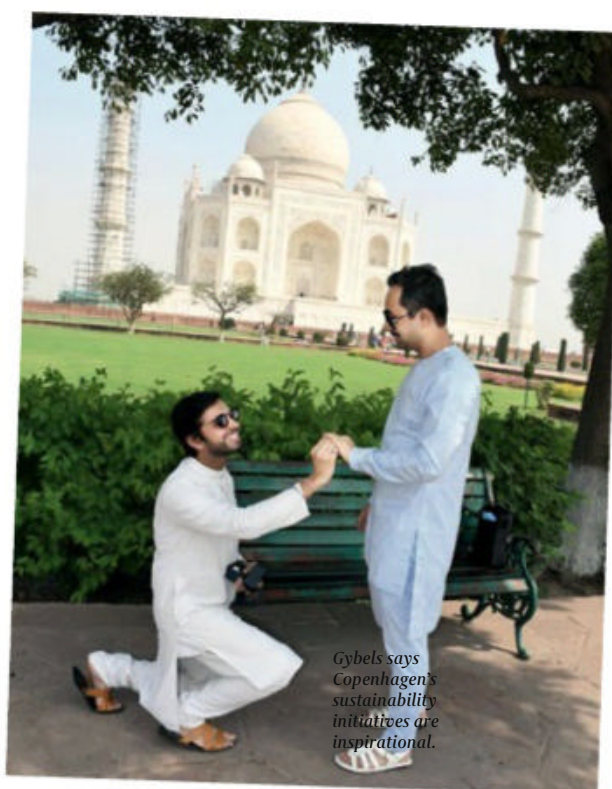
warm, friendly, and radical, and we encountered no problems anywhere. You should always remember that you are new to the place, and it is up to you to respect the culture of that place without upsetting the sentiments of anyone.

What are your travel essentials?

You should be ready with your cards and cash. Pack according to the weather of the place you are visiting. Keep your documents, like passport, visa, and Adhaar card, ready if you are travelling to another country. A power bank can be a lifesaver. A small medical kit and plenty of undergarments and socks will also come very handy.

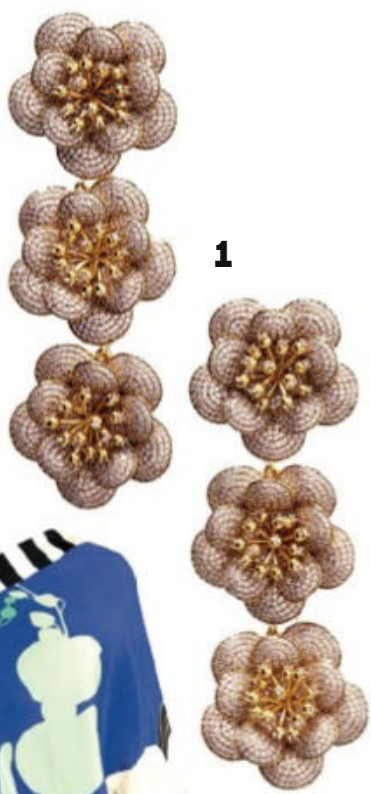
What does your travel bucket list look like?

We have ticked off the hot air balloon ride from our bucket list. Apart from that, my dream is to see the Eiffel Tower with Chaitanya. I want to see London, Paris, and Amsterdam together. We also want to see the Bora Bora caves. Around June or July, we might plan a trip to Bali. ✨



Gybel's says Copenhagen's sustainability initiatives are inspirational.

The couple's first trip together was to Agra, where Sharma proposed.



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FLOWER POWER

Here are our favourite floral-inspired looks for the start of the new season. **BY RALAN KITHAN**

1. Shalimar Gold-plated Crystal Clip Earrings, **Begüm Khan**, \$2,548 (₹207,022); net-a-porter.com
2. Printed Pants-Bargenia Pants, **Limerick by Abirr n' Nanki**, ₹9,900; limerick.in
3. Enya Printed Crepe Midi Dress, **Reformation**, \$517 (₹42,000); net-a-porter.com
4. Handwoven Printed Silk Slip Dress, **p é r o**, price on request; available via pero.retail@gmail.com.
5. Printed Off Shoulder Dress, **ATSU**, ₹16,990; atsu.in
6. Printed Overlap Top, **KAZO**, ₹1,990; available at Palladium Mumbai
7. One Shoulder Tulle Gown with Ruffled Upper Body and Cold Shoulder Sleeves, **Gauri & Nainika**, ₹1,40,000; gauriandnainika.com
8. One Shoulder Drape Dress, **Nupur Kanoi**, ₹25,800, available at Nupur Kanoi Flagship Kolkata
9. Trefoil Poppies Skirt, **adidas x Gucci GG**, price on request; gucci.com
10. T Monogram Floral Bucket Bag, **Tory Burch**, ₹61,218; nordstrom.com
11. Embellished Leather Mules, **Loewe**, \$1,727 (₹1,40,319); net-a-porter.com



THE PRINT STORY

Pair your outfits with striking prints and let the patterns speak. **BY RALAN KITHAN**

- 1.** Coneman Jacquard Crewneck Sweater, **ICE CREAM**, ₹18,856, nordstrom.com **2.** Floral Print Cotton-Poplin Shirt, **Dries Van Noten**, £504.56 (₹50,797); mrporter.com **3.** Green Forest Blossom Classic Shirt, **SUKETDHIR**, ₹24,650; suketdhir.com **4.** Pixel Rose-print Denim Jacket, **KENZO**, £884 (₹89,044); mr.porter.com **5.** Barocco Silhouette Silk Shirt, **Versace**, ₹1,23,900; versace.com **6.** Handwoven Merino Wool Printed Shirt, **p é r o**, price on request; available via pero.retail@gmail.com **7.** Floral-print Straight-leg Trousers, **ETRO**, ₹1,04,360; farfetch.com **8.** Oblique Cardigan, **Dior**, price on request; dior.com **9.** Floral Shirt, **Dhruv Kapoor**, ₹14,500; dhruvkapoor.com **10.** Trefoil Zip Jacket, **adidas x Gucci GG**, price on request; gucci.com



with digitisation. Technology is almost always the future, and as creators, we need to adapt and adopt new tech.

When it comes to art, I enjoy the exploration of mediums, which is why I'm a full-time practising artist who is also the creative director of a design agency and a popular culture fashion label. I prefer to play and experiment and then leave the interpretation to the viewer.

Do you see AI taking over the Indian fashion and art space in a few years?

I wouldn't say taking over, but I can certainly say it can not and should not be ignored. The

Jayesh Sachdev

FASHION FOR FUTURE

If iconic Disney characters had an Indian wedding, how would they dress up? Artist and designer Jayesh Sachdev has the answers backed by his imagination, creativity, fashion aesthetics, and AI. **BY CHIRAG MOHANTY SAMAL**

JAYESH SACHDEV, founder of The Quirk Box fashion label and The Quirk Box Design Studio made news recently when he dressed Walt Disney's iconic characters Mickey and Minnie Mouse, Donald and Daisy Duck in Indian wedding attire using artificial intelligence (AI). Opulent ensembles, jewellery and head gear—the series of images aptly showcased the refined yet maximalist aesthetics of Indian bridal couture but gave it a futuristic edge. Astronaut Bridal Couture Week, Mars Fashion Week, and Bridal Asia Couture Week ft. *Chimps of Chikmagalur* and *Billis of Balochistan* are some of the other intriguing photo series that compel

one's attention towards the overlapping space of fashion, art, and AI. Sachdev tells us how he uses bridal and pret as mediums to showcase art and how explorations around the world bring new approach to his designs.

EXCERPTS FROM THE INTERVIEW:

Tell us about the bridal fashion series that you created using AI? What was your inspiration?

With the advent of cameras, artists who were used to documenting the world with their brush strokes were, to an extent, replaced with photographers. Artists who did layouts, physically drawing ruled lines, typography, and illustration by hand for print publications, were alternated



COURTESY OF JAYESH SACHDEV



▲ Clockwise from above: Sachdev recently travelled to Oslob for a swimming experience with whale sharks; the designer recommends a visit to MoMA in New York for art connoisseurs; the designer's Bridal Asia Couture ft. Chimps of Chikmagalur; Sachdev reimagined Mickey Mouse with bridal elements using AI; an exhibit from the designer's Mars Fashion Week collection.

opportunities and explorations are endless and allow for one's creative threshold to be pushed further.

How difficult was it to blend bridal and fashion elements with iconic characters like Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and Batman?

The challenge is to be able to conceive an idea, visualise a scene, and then have the tool of AI help build that for you.

How would you describe your journey with The Quirk Box so far? What is the brand's USP?

Quirk Box has been a highly fulfilling and compelling journey. The concept was to

put art into a new medium; to put my artworks, illustrations, paintings, and imagination onto fabric, not just canvas, and turn the audience into walking art galleries and canvases. The USP has always been its print and its ability to be a conversation starter.

What role does travel play in your life?

Travel is always instrumental. It allows us to cut off from the monotony of our everyday being and add newer dimensions to the way we experience and see things. This is always inspirational in bringing a new approach or perspective to my work.

Tell us about the Bridal Couture 2022/ Mars Fashion Week images.

To quote Picasso, "Everything you can imagine is real." This is the exciting space of AI that allows us to visualise and contextualise surreal visual concepts into reality. Why see things the way they are instead of how else they could be? If space tourism is the future, what's to say we won't have Mars Fashion Week?

Being an artist means not seeing any limitations; we exist in our imagination and live in our fantastical worlds—ones we create for ourselves but showcase to everyone else.

Speaking of bridal couture, what looks do you feel work best for destination weddings?

Creatively, I'm all for screaming prints and maximalism. On a personal front, I am the antithesis of maximalism.

Tell us about some places that you have recently explored?

I live for the thrill of new adventures. Recently, I travelled non-stop for 24 hours through air, ship, car, bus, and scooter to finally find my way to Oslob in Philippines for a one-hour open water swimming experience with 10m-long whale sharks.

Which destination would you recommend as a must for art connoisseurs?

The Musee D'orsay (musee-orsay.fr) in Paris continues to be the best museum I have visited, but the MoMA (moma.org) in New York is equally electrifying.

Of all the cities that you have travelled to, which is your favourite?

New York, known as the "first-world Bombay on steroids."

What are the essentials in your travel wardrobe?

I'm an easy packer and light traveller. I could live out of a haversack. Denims, T-shirts, statement shoes, Ray-Bans, and I'm good to go, anywhere.

What's on your travel bucket list?

Right now, Raja Ampat archipelago in Indonesia. ✦



Interior of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), an art museum, Midtown Manhattan, New York

'TIS THE SEASON OF LOVE

Exude radiance and confidence this month with these beauty essentials. **BY RALAN KITHAN**



- 1.** Water Eyeshadow-201 Rosy Taupe, **KIKO MILANO**, ₹1,190; nykaa.com **2.** Crystal Crush Plumbing Gloss-XL, **Typsy Beauty**, ₹799; typsybeauty.com **3.** Sun Glow Face & Body Highlighter-002, Rose Petal, **Moira Beauty**; ₹1,790, moirabeauty.in **4.** Nail Polish-632 Poppy Field, **Zara**, ₹590; zara.com **5.** Lip Sleeping Mask - Berry (8 g), **LANEIGE**, ₹500; nykaa.com **6.** Rose Quartz Gua Sha, **RAS Luxury Oils**, ₹1,890; rasluxuryoils.com **7.** Womens Daisy Love Eau So Sweet Eau de Toilette (50 ml), **Marc Jacobs**, ₹5,150; shopperstop.com **8.** Liquid Lipstick - Sarafine (3.2 g), **Anastasia Beverly Hills**, ₹2,700; boddess.com

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LONGINES

♂ Longines Evidenza L2.642.4.73.4: Men

With a dimension of 33.10 X 38.75mm, Longines Evidenza L2.642.4.73.4 in a tonneau-shaped case features a silver 'flinqué' dial and blued steel hands, and has an additional small second counter above the date window. ₹1,84,000

♀ Longines Evidenza L2.142.4.73.2: Women

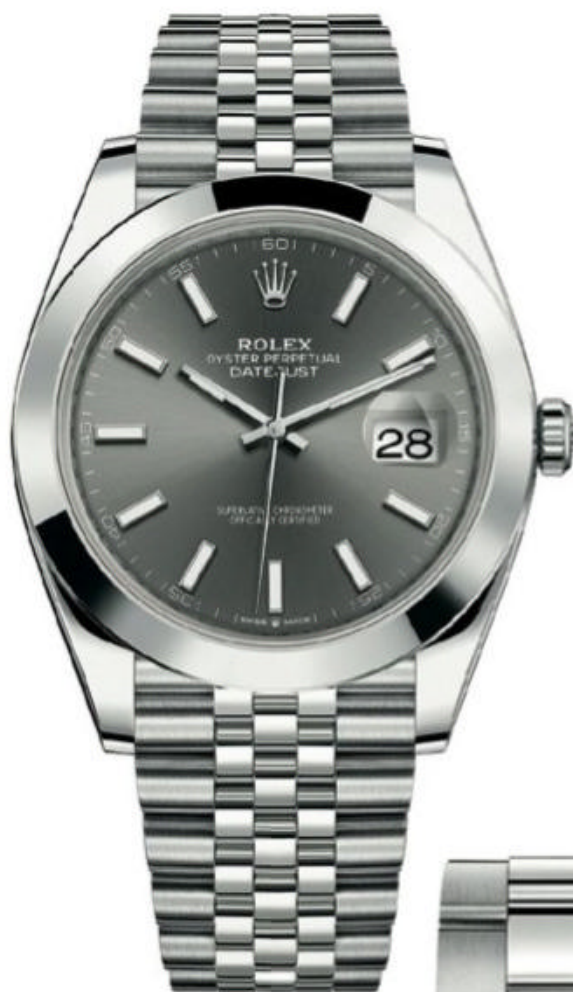
The Longines Evidenza L2.142.4.73.2 has a tonneau-shaped case with a dimension of 26mm by 30mm, a silver 'flinqué' dial, blued steel hands, a date window and comes with power reserve up to 45 hours. ₹1,61,000



TIME FOR LOVE

Lovebirds, pay attention! Here's our pick of couple watches that will delight your partner and make them feel special.

BY RALAN KITHAN



ROLEX

♂ Rolex The Datejust 41

The Datejust 41 comes in a 41mm Oystersteel case and a slate dial. It also features a Jubilee bracelet, and a supple and comfortable five-piece link metal bracelet. A power reserve up to approximately 70 hours is another highlight of the timepiece. ₹6,32,000

♀ Rolex The Datejust 31

The Datejust 31 is a smaller version with a feminine and elegant touch. The watch features a matching bright blue dial in a 31mm case and a bracelet made of Oystersteel and white gold. ₹5,36,000



OMEGA

♂ Omega Constellation Co-Axial Master Chronometer 39 mm

The Constellation Co-Axial Master Chronometer 39mm for men features a sun-brushed black dial and a bezel engraved with Roman numerals in a stainless-steel case. The watch is characterised by its famous half-moons, 'claws' on the case and mono-range bracelet. ₹5,48,500

♀ Omega Co-Axial Master Chronometer 29 mm

The Constellation Co-Axial Master Chronometer 29mm, for women, is a stunning timepiece with a diamond-paved bezel, gleaming in a mother-of-pearl dial with diamond hour markers. ₹9,10,800



SPRINGTIME SPECIALS

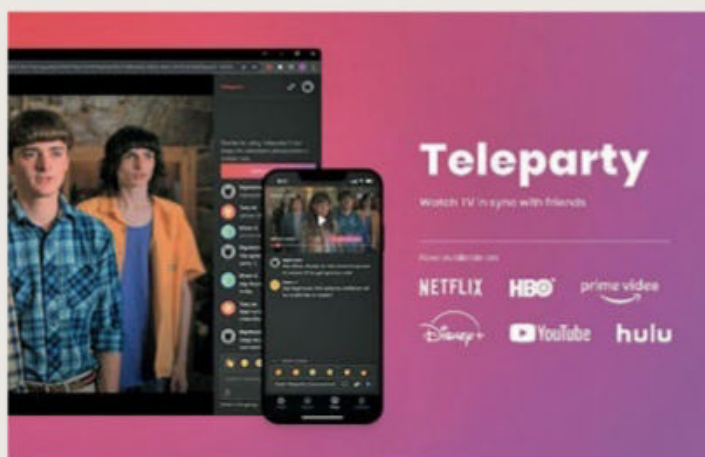
Love's in the air! It's time to seek out gifts they'll always remember. **BY VAIBHAV SHARMA**



BARTENDER'S KIT The Bar Chest 3.0

Lovingly wrapped gift? Check. Fresh pasta lunch? Check. Delish cocktails? You betcha! Just pick up this 36-piece bartender's kit and you're already halfway to creating a memorable Valentine's Day dinner! But it's not just for dates—the easy-carry box makes this a must have for your next villa vacay too. ₹11,500; barbox.in

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Teleparty

That special someone is too far away? At least you can still watch telly together! Get the Teleparty Chrome browser plugin and it'll sync up playback (Netflix, Amazon Prime, and YouTube support included) so you can watch the same show—and one of you can still fall asleep halfway through the series finale!



PHOTO FRAME

Lovebox Color & Photo

Reach out to that special someone with this innovative doodad that's more than just a photo frame. Fire up the app, send notes, sketches, or even photos when you're away, and they just have to open the box to see what you've sent. ₹25,169; amazon.in

INSTANT CAMERA

Kodak Mini Shot 3

This nifty camera-and-printer brings you the best of both worlds: it works as a standalone instant camera for cheesy date-night pics, but the Bluetooth means you can also use this to print any vacay photos straight from your smartphone. Laminated photo paper, as well as inbuilt filters and stickers guarantee this will be on your travel packing list for years to come! ₹9,499; flipkart.com



TWS EARPHONES

AirPods Pro 2

The best TWS earbuds get even better: the nifty ultra-wideband tracking makes sure you'll never misplace these, while Apple's audio processing chops give you stunning 3D audio, head-tracking, and transparency modes. You can also share audio with a second pair of AirPods, so there's another reason to make a special playlist before your next flight. ₹24,990; apple.com



WIRELESS CHARGER

Skyvik Beam 2

There seems to be a rule that one half of every couple be amazingly adept at keeping their phone perpetually out of juice. That's not you, is it? Never mind, just pick up a few of these wireless chargers for your house and no one will ever have to get up at midnight to "Get my charger, please; no, not the one with the wonky cable". Phew! ₹1,649; skyvik.in



THE AVIATION DISPATCH

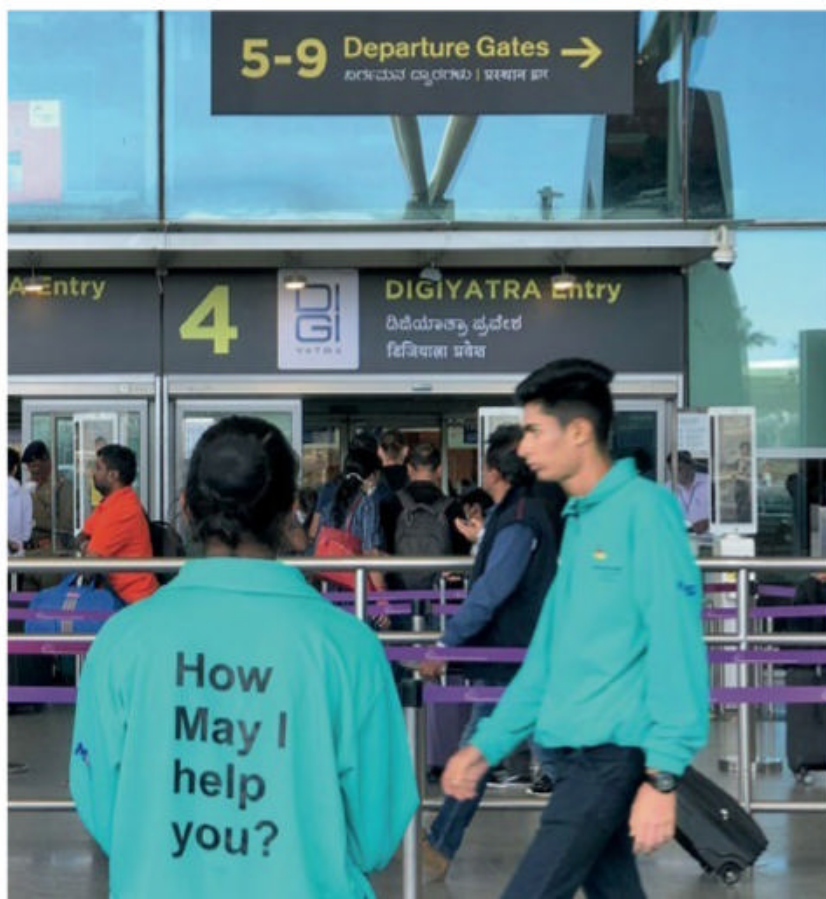
India's aviation scene is soaring on the tech front, with airlines and airports introducing many novelties. Here's our roundup. **BY RIAAN JACOB GEORGE**



DigiYatra: Tried and Tested

We tried and tested the new DigiYatra app a couple of times at Bengaluru and Delhi airports. Barring a few tech glitches in the initial phase, we found the app and overall procedure to be extremely seamless. The biometric app will be rolled out at many more airports this month, making it possibly the biggest talking point for Indian aviation this quarter.

The app essentially uses your face to verify your identity so you no longer need to show your ID card and ticket to the security guard to enter the terminal. The only time-consuming process is, of course, the one-time upload of your Aadhaar card to the app, following which you will have a seamless experience.

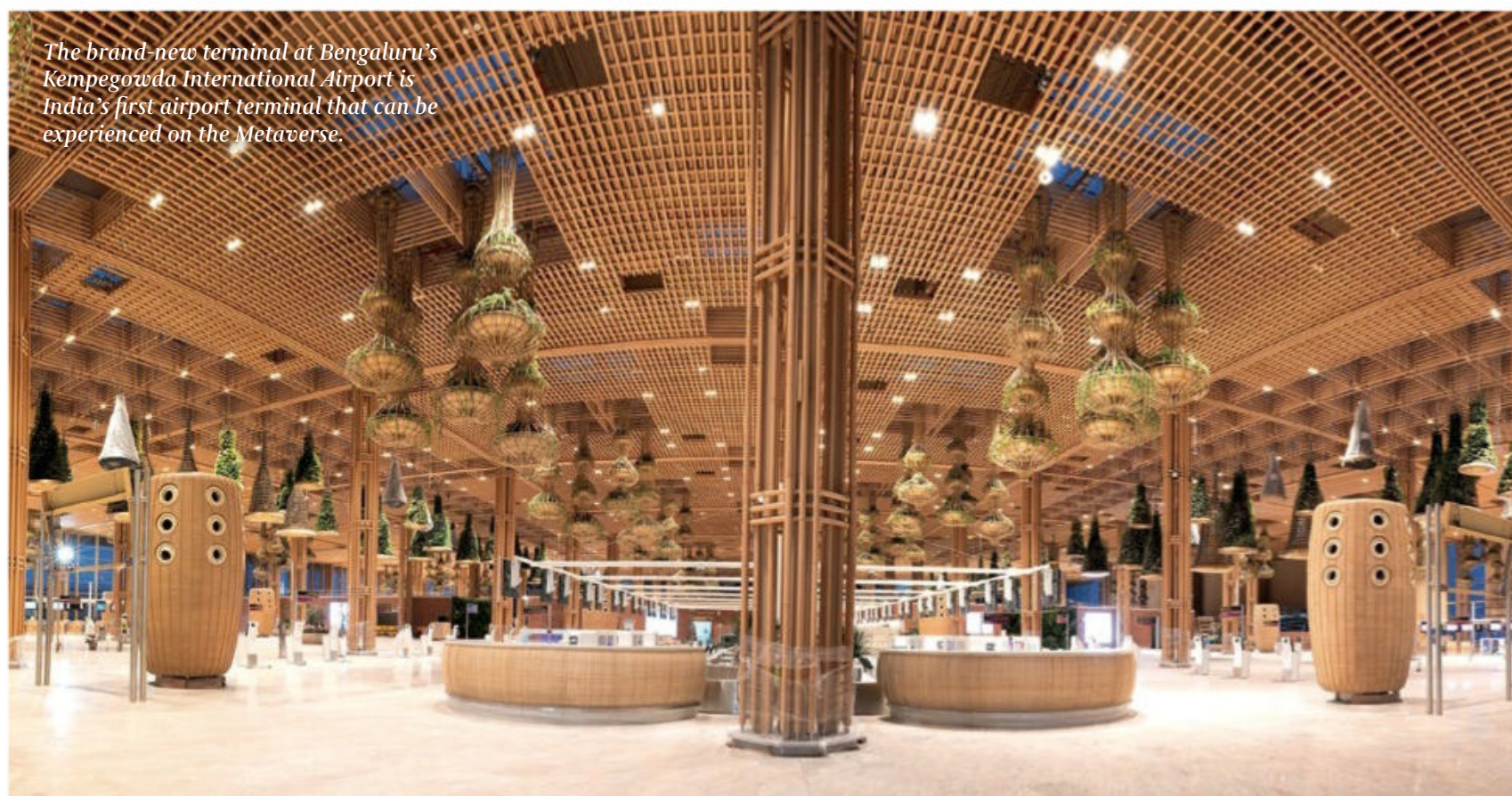


Two New Terminals

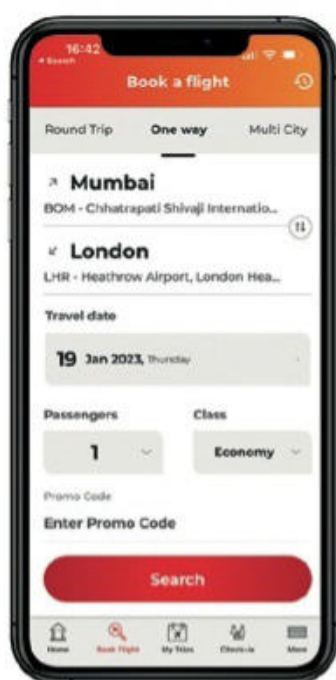
We couldn't be happier that Goa has finally got a new state-of-the-art airport. North Goa's Mopa Airport opened to provide much-needed relief to the over-saturated Dabolim International Airport. The gargantuan terminal, with IndiGo leading the pack in terms of capacity, is said to be capable of welcoming 4.4 million passengers per year. The GMR-run airport has dedicated bays for private jets, providing a boost to ultra-luxury travel in Goa as well as infrastructure for more international flights. Word on the street is that the airport is likely to see a couple of international carriers touching down here in the near future, boosting tourism.

While we already love Bengaluru's Kempegowda International Airport and its fantastic infrastructure, the airport's newly minted Terminal 2 is a world apart. It is an architectural marvel. Located a short distance away from the existing terminal, the new one, which focuses on smart design and technology, will see domestic and international carriers operating from here in a phased manner. The airport features 10,000 square metres of vertical gardens, luxury shopping options, and multiple lounges. It is equipped to welcome 25 million passengers annually.

The DigiYatra app will be rolled out at many more airports this month.



The brand-new terminal at Bengaluru's Kempegowda International Airport is India's first airport terminal that can be experienced on the Metaverse.



Air India App

We have to say that after the Tata Sons takeover, Air India's app is the most impressive one among the Indian carriers. After years of an outdated, glitchy app, the carrier's new app interface is extremely responsive, quick, and easy to use. The colour palette and interface are modern; different functions such as manage booking, check-in, and book flights are easily indicated and interactive. We used it a couple of times on domestic legs and give it a thumbs up!

Airport in Metaverse

One can always count on Bengaluru's Kempegowda International Airport to lead in terms of technology. The airport has recently partnered with AWS and Polyon to make the brand-new Terminal 2, India's first airport terminal that can be experienced on the Metaverse. With the BLR Metaport, travellers can log into an immersive, three-dimensional airport experience where they can navigate the terminal, shop, connect with other travellers, and even check-in for flights. According to the airport spokesperson, the BLR Metaport is the airport's first foray into the world of Web3 and non-fungible tokens (NFTs).

Best In-flight Seats

We just love the in-flight seats of Air India's Boeing 777-200LR; the aircraft recently joined the airline's fleet after serving USA's Delta Air Lines.

These aircrafts will be operating on the Mumbai-San Francisco ultra-long-haul flights. Each seat in the business class features a suite with sliding door. These planes will soon be deployed on the Bengaluru-San Francisco direct flight as well.

It seems like Air India and its USD 400 million cabin refurbishment plan will be giving stiff competition to other westbound carriers from India.

Queue Management

To combat the multiple instances of delays caused due to overwhelmed security and immigration queues at Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport, the airport now relies on artificial intelligence. Through AI, the airport is able to control passenger count, flow, and conduct queue monitoring. The digital tool gives information such as number of travellers, passenger flow, predicts wait time, and even indicates queue build-up. +

THE NEXT BIG THING

- If Indian airports adopt scanners like Dubai International Airport, where passengers are no longer needed remove their electronics like laptops, chargers, and power banks, this could certainly reduce the long queues and waiting times at security checks.
- Watch out for an impressive growth chart and network expansion by Akasa Air, which seems to be getting good service and on-time-performance reviews from passengers.

Business class seats on Air India's Boeing 777-200LR feature a suite with sliding doors.



through
the
lens
Easter Island



IF STONES COULD SPEAK

Rapa Nui, now known as Easter Island, is one of the most remote inhabited places in the world.

NIL ROY captures the eerie mood and the mystical stone heads that exemplify the region.



Standing tall on the Anakena beach, Ahu Nau Nau is an archaeological marvel. Seven awe-inspiring moais have been restored on this ceremonial platform, making it one of the most iconic sites in Rapa Nui.



Clockwise from below: Motu Nui is the largest of three islets just south of Easter Island; Tahai Ceremonial Complex on Easter Island is formed by three ceremonial platforms from where you can catch breathtaking vistas; horses galloping through the landscape is a sight that will stay with you forever.



*The rugged coastline
of Easter Island.*







Clockwise from
 above: From the
 Poike peninsula, you
 can spot the volcano
 summit of Pua
 Katiki; a petroglyph
 near Ahu Tongariki
 whose moais were
 toppled during the
 island's civil wars;
 Rapa Nui National
 Park is a UNESCO
 World Heritage Site.





ASTER ISLAND IS LOCATED around 3,700 kilometers off the coast of Chile, in the southeast corner of the Polynesian triangle. Stretching 163 square kilometres in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, the island enchants with its rolling hills and the wild horses that roam freely across them. Fewer than 10,000 people live on this island made famous by its ancient *moai* statues scattered across Rapa Nui National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. These statues and the barren landscape along with its captivating history, have beguiled visitors for centuries.

The *moais* are imposing monolithic human figures carved by ancient Polynesians between 1250-1500 AD as tombs to honour ancestral chiefs. The inhabitants of Rapa Nui were skilled craftsmen, and carved these breathtaking statues from the volcano Rano Raraku. Moais from this volcano consist of tuff or compressed volcanic ash that was easy to carve. The figures can be anywhere between two and 20 feet high and weigh between 10 and 86 tons. They have long sloping noses, sunken eyes, and prominent chins and brows. There are now an estimated 1,000 *moais* dotting the landscape.

One of the greatest puzzles is how the people of Rapa Nui transported these enormous stone statues across large distances and placed them in various spots around the island. This feat seems impossible at first glance. Archaeologists believe they were rolled on logs from one site to another. As you gaze at the land, it seems as though time stands still, and you wonder what extraordinary tales these stoic guardians have been witnesses to. If only stones could speak! ✚

With Love, from Maheshwar

The ancient town of Maheshwar is a lesson in history and magnanimity. **SIMRRAN GILL** travels with cover star **Bhumi Pednekar** for a taste of its old-world charm.



Produced by **AINDRILA MITRA**

Photographed by **THE HOUSE OF PIXELS**

Assisted by **BABU BHIMAPPA** and **VISHAL POLLENOR**

Styled by **CHANDINI WHABI**

Assisted by **STACEY CARDOZ**

Hair by **ROHIT BHATKAR**

Make-up by **SONIK SARWATE**

Location: **THE AHILYA FORT HERITAGE HOTEL, MAHESHWAR**

*Cover star and climate warrior
Bhumi Pednekar strikes a
pose at the riverside cenotaph.*

ON HER: Outfit, **Atelier Hekayat**;
earrings, **House of Shikha**; ring,
e3k; all prices on request.



A full-page photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a long, black, off-the-shoulder lace gown. She is posing on a wide set of stone steps, leaning back with her right hand on her head and her left hand on her hip. The background is a highly ornate, historic stone building with intricate carvings, arched windows, and statues. The lighting is warm and golden, suggesting late afternoon or early morning.

The actor loves history and wants to go on the Da Vinci tour across Europe.

ON HER: Outfit, **Rami Kadi**; earrings, **Diosa**; ring, **Joolry**; shoes, **Miu Miu**; all prices on request.

I SQUINT MY EYES and stretch my neck. A few seconds in, I can make out the different shades of blue, and where the sky meets the seemingly endless river. The *Travel+Leisure India & South Asia* team is at The Ahilya Fort Heritage Hotel in Maheshwar for the cover shoot of our issue dedicated to romance. The theme is perhaps too fitting for Maheshwar—the town is charming with a hint of mystery, and its folks embrace us with open hearts and arms. Our cover star, actor and climate warrior Bhumi Pednekar agrees, “The energy here is something that I’ve completely fallen in love with,” she says with a wide smile.

At a time when minimalism is taking over most architectural concepts, Ahilya Fort stands out with its contrasting approach. The heritage property set in an 18th-century fort on the banks of River Narmada boasts maximalism, be it in the spaces it offers, food it serves, or the past that it holds so close. And these are just some of the things that Pednekar appreciates about the property. “What stood out for me about Ahilya Fort is just how rooted it is in its origins and yet, modern. They have retained so much of what the original place would have been like—from food to culture to even habits—which is something I love. Even their recipes are what the Maharaja used back then. This old-world charm is very addictive,” she says.

Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar who ruled Maheshwar from 1765 to 1796 built Ahilya Wada to house her personal residence and offices. In 2000, Richard Holkar, her descendant and son of the last Maharaja of Indore, converted his home in Ahilya Wada into what is known today as The Ahilya Fort Heritage Hotel.

Sustainability is also at the heart of Ahilya Fort. From smaller things such as steel jugs for water, glass bottles for toiletries, paper straws, guidelines for linen and towel washing, to bigger undertakings such as electric vehicles for airport transfers, conscious living is an established fact at the property. Our cover star has also always made headlines for her sustainable choices and advocating for the issue of climate change. For her, it’s the small steps that matter. “I think sustainability is a lifestyle. It’s a conscious choice and the need



Pednekar spends time by the River Narmada in Maheshwar.

ON HER: Outfit, **Gaffe**; earrings, **Swarovski**; shoes, **Christian Louboutin**; all prices on request.

of the hour. Sustainability needs to be spoken of widely, adopted widely because it is the future. People need to understand that leading a sustainable lifestyle is not going to be a life of inconvenience. In fact, it will make life a lot more convenient and guilt-free,” Pednekar says.

And the actor is a woman of her words, for she has adopted many sustainable practices in her daily life. “While there are many, something that is easy to start with is segregating your waste at the source. We’ve been doing that for the past couple of years, and the amount of garbage that leaves my house has gone down to 20 per cent. We compost all our wet waste, and it goes into our plants. And we recycle as much of the dry waste as we can. Although it is not the easiest thing to do, my house is also pretty much single-use plastic free,” she says, adding, “We also take care of the little



Pednekar loves the old-world charm of Maheshwar.

ON HER: Outfit, **Amit Aggarwal**; earrings, **House of Shikha**; shoes, **Jimmy Choo**; all prices on request.



The actor ensures a sustainable lifestyle during her travels.

ON HER: Outfit, **Atelier Hekayat**; earrings, **Not Just Bijoux**; bracelet, **Swarovski**; shoes, **Christain Louboutin**; all prices on request.

things. For instance, food wastage, which increases your carbon footprint dramatically. We are very responsible about the usage of food, and also monitor our water consumption. Amongst other things, we've slowly and steadily started to switch to [environment-friendly] vehicles. I just bought my first hybrid car and I've seen a big difference that it makes towards my fuel consumption. I am also about to buy my first EV and I'm supremely excited about it. I feel conscious decisions in your everyday life go a long way."

When asked about how she ensures a sustainable lifestyle during her travels, the actor explains, "I try my level best. I carry my own cutlery and travel with my own glass bottle. When I'm getting ready, I cut down on my consumption of tissue paper or ear buds. Giving up meat and going vegetarian was definitely my first step

towards leading a sustainable lifestyle. It was one of my biggest lifestyle changes. It is also easier when you're travelling abroad because sustainability is a very big part of their culture as compared to what we see within our country," she says.

As we roll the camera for our first shot for the day in Maheshwar, the entire crew seems as if under a spell. We are hooked to the lingering romance, spirituality, and history of Maheshwar. And for Pednekar, history is an obsession. "I love history and historical places," she says. "I want to do the Da Vinci tour that happens across Europe; it talks about conspiracy theories around Da Vinci," she exclaims.

While the actor recounts many incidents throughout the shoot, there is one that is particularly close to her heart. "It was when I travelled alone in 2017, when I was nearly two years old as an actor. I felt like I needed to experience life as an artist a little more and travelled through Austria and France by myself. It was about 25 days, and it changed my life. I was open minded, and made some fantastic friends."

While work takes her places, Pednekar also loves to travel during her down time. "If not shooting, you'll definitely find me on a holiday. I vacation a lot; post-pandemic, I realised it's very important to balance my personal and professional life. Earlier, I kind of felt tormented and guilty every time I took a break, but now I feel it is important for your mental and physical health and it's just constant growth," she says.

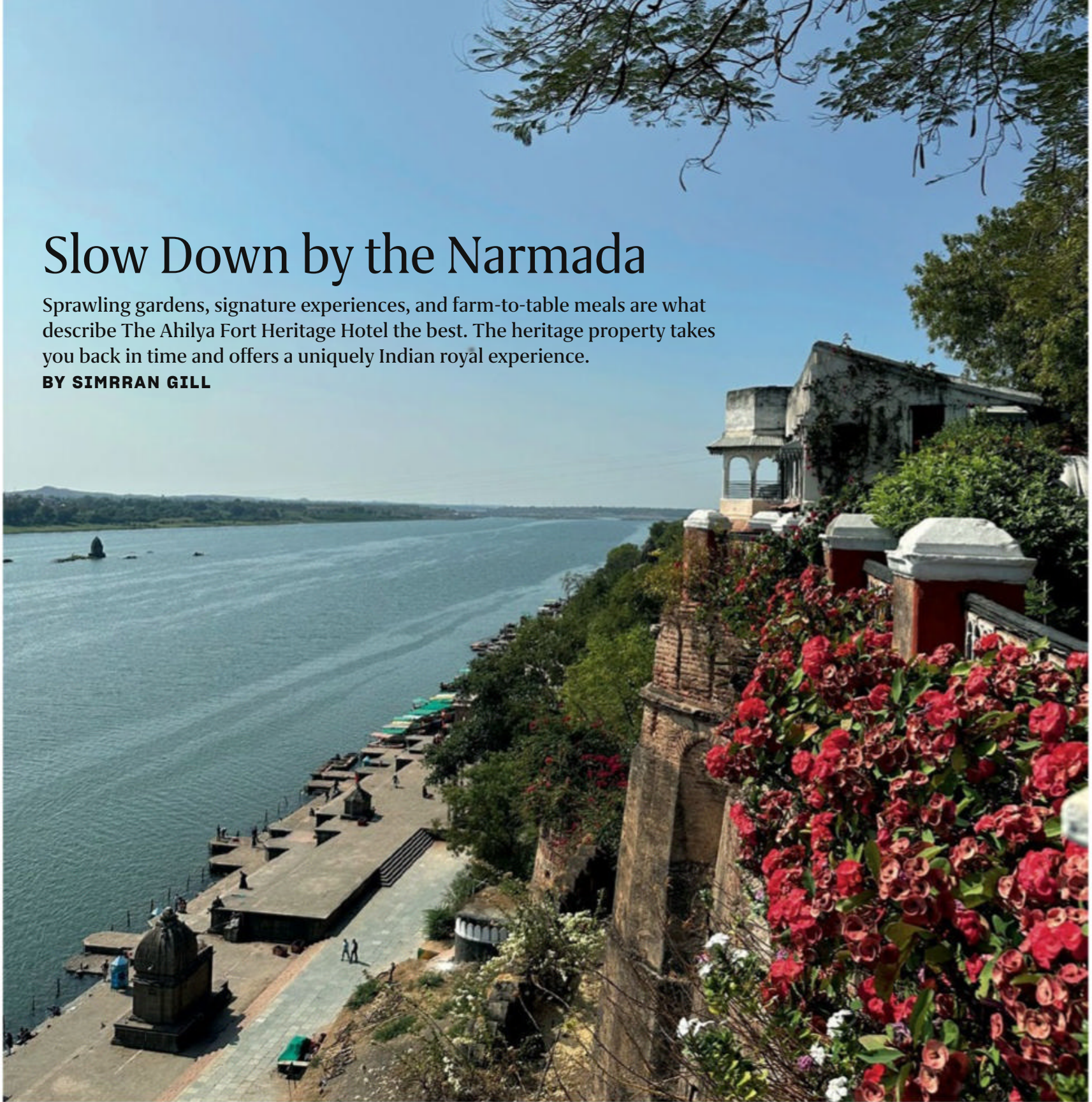
And where would she want to go for a romantic holiday? "Himachal. I feel the hills in India are very romantic with trees, snow-clad mountains, the weather, clean air, and greenery. I'm such a nature baby, and for me, these are luxury and romance." The cover star also sees herself honeymooning some place near the Arctic. "It is a world unknown, and really fascinates me. I would love to be with my partner where there are just sheets and sheets of ice. And if not that, then definitely Italy. I think Italy is just too romantic and there's just so much to do," she tells me.

There is a lot lined up for the actor on the professional front. "It's quite a power packed year for me, I have about five films releasing and I'm shooting for some more. I have *Afwaah* releasing in a couple of weeks, followed by *Bheed*. This year is going to be a complete spectrum for me where I've tried to do very diverse and enriching roles as an actor," she says before signing off. ✦

Slow Down by the Narmada

Sprawling gardens, signature experiences, and farm-to-table meals are what describe The Ahilya Fort Heritage Hotel the best. The heritage property takes you back in time and offers a uniquely Indian royal experience.

BY SIMRRAN GILL



SIMRRAN GILL (2)

SITTING ABOVE THE sacred river Narmada in the ancient town of Maheshwar is Ahilya Fort. Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar who ruled Maheshwar from 1765 to 1796 built her personal residence, office, and darbar hall within the fort, and

called it Ahilya Wada. Cut to the present, Prince Richard Holkar, the descendant of Ahilyabai has converted his home in Ahilya Wada into a heritage property by the name The Ahilya Fort Heritage Hotel. Spread across six buildings with 19 rooms, the property is replete with all modern amenities and comforts.

Time passes easily at The Ahilya Fort Heritage Hotel. You can stroll through the courtyards and gardens, cosy up with your favourite book in a secluded nook, or simply watch the butterflies flutter by. For those wanting more, the bustling village markets of Maheshwar and the riverside

The Ahilya Fort Heritage Hotel overlooks Narmada in the ancient town of Maheshwar. Right: A lunch setup by the pool.





complex of temples and cenotaphs are only a short walk away.

While exploring the property, you are sure to come across renovated rooms and spaces that retain their old-world charm. There is Poshak Wada, which was originally used to store important artefacts of the Holkar State. Today, the shaded quadrangle serves as the central courtyard with a columned seating area, and connects the guest services desk, library, conference room, and six of the hotel's Princely category guest rooms. Lingarchan courtyard is where 101 royal priests performed daily blessings for the entire population of the Holkar State. Today the peaceful space, shaded by an ancient tamarind tree, has two guest rooms with river facing alcoves, and houses the massage treatment room. The Darbaar Wada was the fort's most important building during Maharani Ahliyabai's time—on its first floor was her living quarters. Currently, the floor houses four guest rooms. And then there is Naqarra Bagh, where *naqarra* drums were beaten to open and close the fort gates. Situated on the outer perimeter of the Ahilya Wada, the area today houses three rooms.

The highlight at the property, however, is the dining experience. It is as though you're eating in the home of Prince Richard Holkar. With neither a restaurant nor a varied menu, the experience is one of a kind. Each day, Prince Holkar creates a menu with recipes from his internationally renowned cookbook, *Cooking of the Maharajas*, that use fresh produce from their organic house garden and farm. While breakfast is a selection of muesli, eggs, *poha*, and the day's special served at Mandap, a sit-out area overlooking the Narmada, lunch is generally a light western fare prepared with produce gathered in the morning from the

▲ Clockwise from above: The rooms at the property have an old-world charm, and come with modern amenities; the pool is nestled within a walled garden; meals at the property are prepared with fresh produce from the organic garden and farm.

organic garden, and dinner is traditional *thaali* with regional specialities and dishes prepared with a 'Holkar twist'. Other amenities at the property include a large pool nestled within a walled garden. Guests can take a swim or simply lounge by the poolside in the shade of the lemon tree.

The property also offers certain signature experiences. Not to be missed is the sunset boat ride to Baneshwar Temple, considered to be the centre of the universe. On the return journey, you row amidst floating lamps, with the *bhajan mandali* (local musicians) singing devotional songs dedicated to the Narmada in the background. The Moonlight Promenade on a Hand Poled Boat experience includes an hour under the stars on the Narmada. You are served non-alcoholic beverages and vegetarian snacks as you float along with flickering lamps under the night sky. There are local musicians to entertain you. In yet another experience, you can enjoy a candlelight dinner 200 metres downriver at the Boliya Chhatri. ahilyafort.com +

Travel + Leisure
India & South Asia

Experiences

TRAVELLERS' TALES, FROM NEAR AND FAR



BACKYARD OF MEMORIES

A curated trip across the Konkan coast of Maharashtra stirs up nostalgia for a childhood filled with food and love for **KSHIPRA BHATT**.

AS OUR VEHICLE CAME to a halt, I noticed an ancient Hindu temple under a huge banyan tree canopy. The air felt warm, yet pleasing as sun rays scantily pierced through the trees. I was in Konkan, the coastal plains of Maharashtra, lying between the Arabian Sea and Western Ghats. The region is famous for its Alphonso mangoes, beaches, and history. Despite all the attractive characteristics of the region, the simple setting of a temple under a huge tree instantly transported me to my grandmother's quaint, ancestral home with similar features. I spent most of my childhood summer holidays in the very backdrop.

A snug, two-storeyed bungalow covered by thick foliage and a small marble Datta Mandir (a temple of Lord Datta) overlooking the home was a sight to behold. Mornings were spent foraging greens from the backyard garden, while afternoon lunches saw us devouring delicious regional meals made by my *aaji* (grandmother). I eagerly looked forward to the evenings as my cousins and I would spend the time outdoors, mostly around the temple, playing and chit chatting before the calmness of the night fell upon us.

Many years later, after a bout of physical, emotional and mental upheaval brought about by the pandemic and other personal setbacks, I decided to start travelling again. But this time I focussed on the beauty of the backyard as opposed to trudging a faraway land. When I started zeroing down on the places to visit, I stumbled upon a trip to Konkan with a small group of travellers curated by The Western Routes (thewesternroutes.com) –a boutique experiential travel company, which curates experiences deep rooted in one's culture.

And just like that, I returned to Konkan because I was hungry. I was hungry to meet the people I had met growing up who would lead the simplest of lives but always had a heart filled with joy and face shining with a smile; I was hungry to savour the dishes that my *aaji* made with a lot of love but somehow got lost through the years.

Clockwise from left: Traditional Maharashtrian food at Bondre family home in Devghar village; sunset at O'NEST Oceano Pearl, A Beach Homestay; Ratnagiri is a port town in Maharashtra.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: SHUTTERSTOCK; PRACHI CHAVAN (2)

► Poli (far right) and vaalachi usal or butter beans curry (right) are traditional Maharashtrian recipes.



On a balmy afternoon, the landscape merged into a blanket of tall, green coconut, cashew, jackfruit, and mango trees. The scent of Konkani wafted through the air. Visibly, the winding roads became narrower but picturesque, dotted on both sides with tiny villages and lines of trees. Some nooks gave us glimpses of the mighty Arabian sea.

The first stop was Ganeshgule. Just 25 kilometres from Ratnagiri, Ganeshgule is known for its secluded beach and a beautiful temple of Lord Ganesha. The ocean was as vibrant as ever; the soft sand under my feet was cool. Though there was a calmness around me, I was hungry, and this time for some real food. And in no time, we were served hot *vaalachi usal* (butter beans curry) with *poli* (Indian unleavened flatbread) and freshly fried crunchy papads and *koshimbir*

The writer tries the traditional way of drawing water out of a well.



(Maharashtrian salad typically seasoned with crushed peanuts). How I missed the *vaal* in the coconut, tamarind gravy! The simple *nosh* was just what my *aaji* used to serve. Could I ask for anything more to re-energise my soul that was exhausted from over six hours of travelling from Pune? The rest of the day until midnight was spent getting drenched in the ocean and gazing at the starry moonlit sky right on the beach.

The next day, after sipping freshly extracted *madi* (palm wine), we headed to Devghar village in Sangameshwar *tehsil* of Ratnagiri district, just 50 kilometres from Ratnagiri. One has to trek down to reach the Bondre family home. It is a 100-year-old ancestral home of the family that still lives in it. We were welcomed to the beats of *dhol* and our warm host performed traditional *aarti* at the door.

A stroll around the traditional Konkani home with hip roof and cow dung plastering reminded me of a bygone era. A pitched roof with large verandah is the most striking part of homes like these; it is where the family shares bitter sweet bits of life and enjoys a cup of *chaha* (typically milky, sugary tea) with their neighbours in the late afternoons. I also noticed some wooden framed windows overlooking the vast expanse of the farm and vegetation surrounding the home. I was tempted to curl up by the window with a book for hours, just what I did as a child. Exposed shelves, steel plates, bowls, and *tambya bhand* (water pots) etched with names arranged aesthetically, and traditional *chul* (mud stove) were certainly the highlights of the old-style kitchen. “Only the water

GETTING THERE

The Ratnagiri Airport is connected to Mumbai, Pune, and many other cities via regular flights.

STAY

Kohinoor Samudra Beach Resort, Ratnagiri offers executive and luxury rooms facing the sea. *Doubles from ₹4,125;* kohinoorhotels.com

from *matka* (earthen pot) can keep you cool in this scorching heat”, said Bondre as she hurriedly filled a *tambya* with water from the *matka* and handed over a *bhanda* to drink from it. By the time we finished the tour of the home and its surroundings filled with trees ranging from pepper, coffee, and a variety of bananas, it was time for the next meal. I sat on the floor, legs folded, even before the food was served on my plate.

Afternoon sun was overhead; the coolness inside the home seemed like a blessing. Bondre and a couple of ladies began arranging banana leaves, steel bowls, and *tambya bhanda* on the floor for each of us. The house was filled with a scent of fresh, homemade *chulivarcha pithla* and *bhakri* (gram flour and millet flatbread made on a mud stove). The most exquisite traditional vegetarian meal on the banana leaf couldn't begin without the melodious echo of the verse *vadani kawal ghetta*, which is typically recited before any meal. By now, I knew this two-day voyage was going to transform my soul.

On the last day, on our way back, we made a pitstop at Patwardhan Mango Farm in Devrukh. It is a sleepy hamlet situated 21 kilometres from Sangameshwar and 56 kilometres from Ratnagiri. As suggested in history, Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and Sambhaji Maharaj visited Devrukh frequently.

The Patwardhans have been occupying the most ancient *wada* (the traditional residence in Maharashtra) here for more than 40 generations. The skylit courtyard formed the nucleus of this house. It overlooked the landscaped exterior filled with massive mango trees, a well with a pulley to draw water, and perennial blooms. The house undoubtedly boasted all the things old-fashioned including a bamboo *soop* (rice cleaner)

The front courtyard of the Patwardhan wada.



Paddy fields in Sangameshwar.

to clean grains and traditional iron *villi* (vegetable cutter) which is found in every Maharashtrian home. In fact, it was a *villi* that inspired me to learn cooking; I began with cutting vegetables to help my *aaji* in creating her extraordinary meals.

The Patwardhan family makes a myriad of preservative-free products thanks to the huge *aamrai* (mango orchard) that they own, and supplies to the big food brands. The family invited us to see their abode and even offered mango *mawa* (a mango flavoured sweet made of dried evaporated milk solids) and delicious mango *poli* (dried mango flatbread) to taste. While Konkan is all things virtuous, it made me think—why did I take a two-day holiday away from my then three-year-old daughter to come to this hidden wonder of Maharashtra? Was it for food? Was it to meet new people? Was it for the beaches or for the temples? Or was it for Instagrammable sunsets and sunrises at the secluded beaches in Konkan? The answer itself was as complex as these questions.

Now, whenever I think of Konkan, I think of my childhood visits to my grandmother's home but also of the distinct scent of old homes, fresh tropical trees, tiny villages, meals served on banana leaves, ancient temples, and great historic anecdotes. +

CITY OF CONTRASTS

There is an ongoing tug of war between forces of development and heritage in Nairobi. **NITIN CHAUDHARY** walks the streets of the city to understand which influence will eventually dominate.

Nairobi National Park has a backdrop of skyscrapers.

I SHOULD HAVE BEEN overwhelmed. After all, I was in Nairobi National Park in Kenya, one of the few wildlife parks adjacent to a capital city. Three lionesses had just passed by me, unmindful of the crush of gaping tourists and ignoring the persistent clicks of cameras. However, my eyes remained transfixed on the horizon.

There, on a flat landscape—its backdrop spattered equally with the orange hue of the morning sun and the brown of hung dust—several concrete pillars stood erect, cutting across the national park for as far as the eyes could see. On them ran a train track, over which an orange-white train slid smoothly. The whole construct seemed as if built by extraterrestrial creatures who may have landed on Earth last night, and who found this jungle a suitable place to land their ships.

This concrete stretch seemed irreconcilable with its surroundings. It looked ugly.

“What’s that?” I asked Edward, my guide. He caught my eye and shook his head. “Railway. Should have connected us to Uganda,” said Edward. I later learned that this standard gauge railway was an ambitious project of the Kenyan government. The train starts in Mombasa, runs across not only Nairobi National Park but other iconic national parks in Kenya. It passes Nairobi before its final stop in the Kenyan town of Duka Moja in the middle of the forest. The stretch to Uganda was never completed.

The government decided to build the new rail line from grounds up instead of renovating its existing rail network, which was originally constructed by the British. This time they sought the help of the Chinese. The mounting debt to China and linked stories of corruption



▲ *The Nairobi-Mombasa standard gauge railway passes through the wildlife reserve.*

were at the centerstage of the elections that were ongoing while I was in Nairobi.

That morning, in the park, I saw lionesses, zebras, giraffes, and crocodiles. However, what remained with me as I left the national park was the concrete construction that bisected the park. Surely, environmentalists have questioned its existence and how it has led to an environmental degradation in Kenya. Still, it exists, much like an ink blot on white paper, a reminder of the age long conflict between development and nature.

I had come to Nairobi the day before to study the capital of Kenya, a country that has become the poster child of growth in Africa. Like many other tourists, I chose to visit the national park first. It was there that I saw the signs of a growing nation reflected in the newly built railway line that replaced the old “Lunatic Express,” as the previous Mombasa to Nairobi train is usually known. “Why so?” I asked Jackie, my colleague later that evening. “It was a colonial gift from the time of British East Africa,” she said, reminding me of the rail network that we inherited in India. “Many workers were brought from India to build the railway,” Jackie continued. “The line was named so as many of the workers were killed by man-eating lions in those days.”

Those migrants from the subcontinent stayed back, and integrated with the society after Kenya’s independence in 1963. The community—majority of them tracing their ancestry to Gujarat and Punjab—has since then flourished. The 50,000 Kenyans of Indian descent have now been recognised as the 44th tribe in the country, and are involved in the social, economic, and

political life of the country. “You should try the Indian food here. They say that it’s one of the best you can find outside India. Even better than in London!” Jackie said with a smile as we waved goodbye.

There is no better place to try Indian food in Nairobi than the Diamond Plaza food court (diamondplazakenya.com) in the city’s Indian quarter. Diamond Plaza is a mall in a neighbourhood of Nairobi populated predominantly by second generation Indians. In a somewhat worn-down food court, one can find many Indian restaurants. Thanks to the flourishing Gujarati community, there are several vegetarian options as well. Being a vegetarian, I settled for a *naan* and *chana masala*, which for 900 Kenyan shillings (roughly ₹600) turned out to be cheaper than what I would have paid in Delhi for a meal of a similar quality.

Nairobi, situated only 140 kilometres south of the equator, calls itself as the ‘Green City in the Sun’ for the obvious reason that there’s sunlight almost throughout the year. Though it was July, and hence winter in the southern hemisphere, Nairobi was pleasantly warm. I wouldn’t have dared to visit during the summer months, but it turns out that summer is bearable in Nairobi. Like most African capitals, this city is also built in the mountains and the altitude of 1,800 meters keeps it cool during peak summer.

▼ *From left: The park is home to many giraffes; zebras grazing in the wide open grass plains of Nairobi National Park.*





A decorated minibus, locally known as matatu. The matatu art culture is a source of employment and livelihood for many youngsters. Above: White ants, known as tsiswa, are a delicacy in Kenya.

GETTING THERE

Ethiopian Airlines (ethiopianairlines.com) flies from Delhi and Mumbai to Nairobi via Addis Adaba.

STAY

Sankara Nairobi, Autograph is located near attractions like The Village Market and Nairobi National Park. Doubles from ₹24,151; marriott.com

EAT

Haandi, an Indian food chain from the UK, has a branch in Nairobi, and offers good Indian food. haandirestaurants.com

Amaica The Restaurant on Peponi Road in Westlands offers authentic Kenyan food. If you are adventurous, try the fried ants' dish *tsiswa* here. amaica.co.ke

The Talisman restaurant offers a range of African and Indian specialities and is a well-known meeting place for the local gentry. thetalisman-restaurant.com

Once outside, I began to study the city more carefully. Walk long enough and you can make out the hills that mark the city. On the first look, it seemed that almost everything is newly constructed in the capital. Like any other emerging market capital, there are a lot of people on the streets, leading to fierce traffic. To counter this rush, there are breathing spaces in the form of flowering trees and small gardens. Nairobi comes across as a planned city. There are shopping malls, luxury apartment buildings, and shiny new office buildings sprouting everywhere. But walk a little further and onto the side streets in the suburbs, and that's where the corner shops appear. They punctuate almost every street corner very much like the *kirana* stores back in India. A majority of the city's population shops in these small stores. Even milk is bought loose from what the Kenyans refer to as 'milk ATMs', which are hole-in-the-wall setups selling milk.

Here, in these bylanes, the dichotomy between the newly built, eye-catching Nairobi and old town from where it emerged is clearly visible. While there are shiny Land Rovers and luxury cars in abundance on the streets, cruising through the roads of this capital city are also graffiti-painted vans called *matatu*. There are roughly 300,000 of them in Nairobi alone. Their sides are plastered with Bible's verses in vibrant fonts. These *matatus* are owned privately and are the preferred mode for local Kenyans for their daily commute. Watching the paintings on these *matatus* is a way to understand the prevailing trends as well. During my time

in Nairobi, I saw the sides of these vans painted with the faces of the leading candidates for the upcoming elections, emerging rappers, and of course, football stars. "A *matatu* is like a newspaper," a corner shop owner told me as I stood beside his shop watching them pass by. Commuting in a *matatu* is cheaper than hailing a taxi and a single trip usually costs around ₹10. Tired of roaming around in dusty streets, I sat in one of them running on a fixed route that would bring me back to the city centre.

Dusk had begun to settle in as I made my way to the centre. The streets were beginning to swell with people leaving from work; the sides of these streets were gearing up to serve food to them. I had a dinner invite from my local friends. It was in a restaurant in one of the posh neighbourhoods of Nairobi. I decided to hail an Uber to this place, for no *matatu* goes there.

At the formal restaurant, perched on a hill, I sat with local delicacies that my friends recommended. There were wild mushrooms and *bambara* nuts (local groundnuts) for me, along with vegetables. My friends snacked on *tsiswa*, a dish of fried white ants gently sprinkled with salt. Around me were well-dressed, sophisticated Kenyans debating the upcoming elections and how the debt from China is dragging the economy down. My mind though was still stuck in the streets that I had left behind. I couldn't erase the dichotomy that I had witnessed— building a train track against preserving nature, exclusive Land Rovers amidst loud *matatus*, posh malls against milk ATMs.

Nairobi came across as a city that's enduring growth pangs. How it develops and addresses the challenges it faces will serve as a template for other African cities, for none seem as advanced as Nairobi. It's a city that I will come back to again for more lessons. With that resolve, I picked the fork and dug into my bowl of pickled vegetables and joined the sound of soft laughter that had now filled the restaurant room. +

SEA, SUGARCANE, AND THE SHORE

On a week long road journey across Mauritius, **MEENAKSHI J** encounters littoral villages, charming national parks, and remnants of the great Indian migration.

“ARE WE LANDING on the Indian Ocean?” I wondered as the Air Mauritius in-flight entertainment system displayed ‘Port Louis’ on screen, but no land was visible in the midst of blue waters. I pinched the screen to zoom in, but no joy!

Was it an emergency landing or was I tired of waiting for the ‘Land of Dodo’ after an arduous journey from Shillong to Mauritius, a speck in the vast Indian Ocean?

The speck grew larger as our flight touched down at the Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam International Airport, around 48 kilometres south-east of Port Louis, the capital city of Mauritius. The visa-on-arrival process was seamless and paved the way to an exciting road trip across this jewel on the Indian Ocean.

The week-long trans-Mauritius road journey began in Tamarin, a charming littoral village located on the west coast, around 34 kilometres from the airport, known for dolphin watching, surfing, 18-century cobblestoned salt pans, and a relaxed nightlife.

The first day was spent in visiting Maconde, a hamlet sandwiched between the historic Le Morne and Baie du Cap. It offers breathtaking vistas of the Indian Ocean on one side, and a curved portion of the picturesque coastal road from a viewpoint off a cliff. This was followed by a late lunch at Wapalapam Island Eatery (wapalapam.com) located on the foothills of Le Morne Brabant mountain (a UNESCO

For one of the most beautiful vistas of Mauritius, visit the Chamarel viewpoint.



site), and run by Rok Flander, a former snowboard champion turned restaurateur. We ended our sightseeing a bit early, to unwind by the terrace pool of Hotel Veranda Tamarin, a property with bohemian decor, located opposite the Tamarin Beach.

The west coast experience wouldn't be complete without an early morning boat ride into mid-sea to spot pods of dolphins frolicking around travellers. This was followed by an hour-long road trip to Ganga Talao and Chamarel. The Ganga Talao, commonly known as Grand Bassin, is home to 33-metre tall statues of Mangal Mahadev and Durga Maa. The nearby crater lake formed in a now extinct volcano is considered sacred and is adorned with shrines dedicated to the Hindu pantheon. Today, Ganga Talao is a sacred pilgrimage site for the Hindus of Mauritius, so much so that it has been declared a national heritage.

After a quick darshan at Ganga Talao, we drove up to the picturesque Chamarel village through misty winding roads flanked by sugarcane and pineapple plantations. Situated at an elevation of 259 metres in the western hills near Black River Gorges National Park, Chamarel turned out to be riveting. It is also home to a large Creole population, the force behind the many family-run restaurants and homestays, which are a huge hit with tourists visiting its natural wonders, tea plantations, and distilleries.

Our first stop here was Rhumerie de Chamarel (rhumeriedechamarel.com), a distillery that not only specialises in manufacturing rum out of sugarcane, but is also designed to provide a holistic experience to guests. We were given a guided tour of the eco-friendly rum making process—freshly harvested sugarcane is transferred within four hours of its harvest to be pressed and filtered to make sugarcane juice, and later initiated in huge 25 hectolitre stainless steel vats for

the fermentation process to take place. Once fermented, it is distilled in copper column stills and stored in steel and wooden vats to age and obtain aroma, colour, and roundedness. The finest of this rum is offered to guests like us as part of a complimentary rum tasting session.

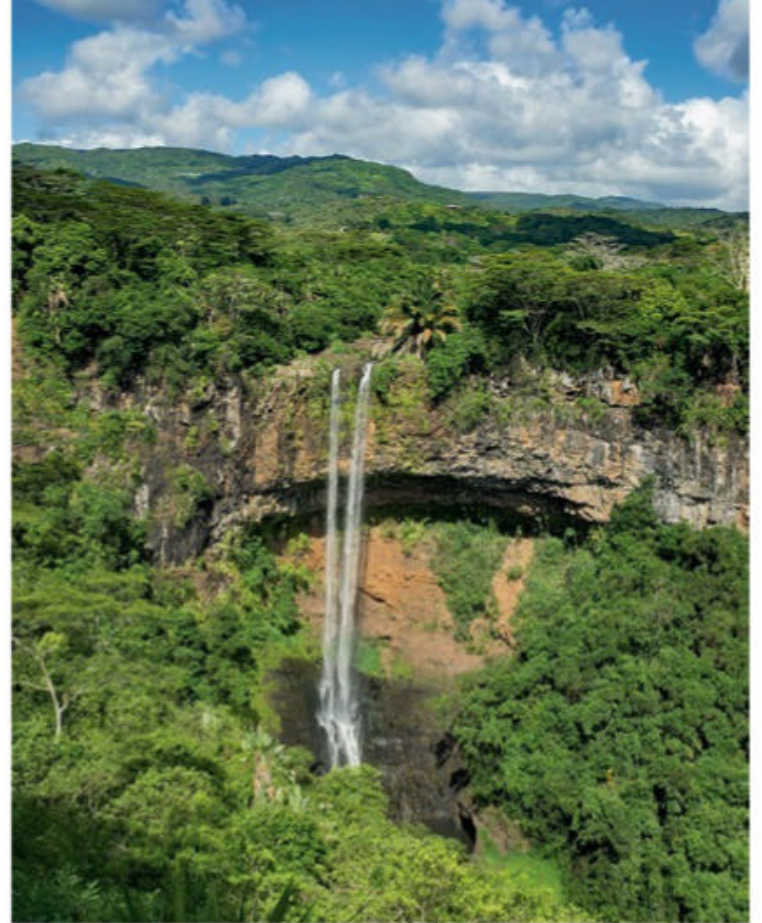
With a few giddy heads amongst us, we then drove up further to soak in clutter-free vistas of the western coast and its forested hillsides, over a satisfying lunch at the Le Chamarel restaurant. Post lunch, it was time to be awed by the geological wonder, Seven Coloured Earth Geopark that sports multicoloured dunes owing to molten

Ganga Talao, commonly known as Grand Bassin, is home to 33-metre tall statues of Mangal Mahadev and Durga Maa. Above: Dolphins in Tamarin Bay.



FROM TOP: PETER CROME/ALAMY; SHUTTERSTOCK

PHOTO CREDIT



volcanic formations. Here, we also spotted the spectacular Chamarel Waterfall and giant turtles.

The next morning, we met leopards at Casela Nature Park (caselaparks.com) that is spread over 350 hectares near the Cascavelle village, with a backdrop of the Rempart mountain. The park offers a mix of activities like wildlife safaris, canyon swings, avian enclosures, and quad-biking. After the adrenaline fix, we drove 55 kilometres north towards the Grand Baie region. Our night halt was at the contemporary Domaine de Grand Baie luxury apartment, but not before a dinner that was an ode to the island's migrant cuisine, aesthetically plated by the property's award-winning chef Ajnisha Ungnoo.

In northern Mauritius, we went cruising on the waters of the Indian Ocean. We reached a historical site and disembarked to chase butterflies and explore the knee-deep emerald waters of Flat Island, a nature reserve of 253 hectares. What we did not know then was that we were retracing a historical journey. This would dawn upon us the next morning, at Aapravasi Ghat (around 26 kilometres from the Grand Baie area). Located on the bay of Trou Fanfaron in the capital of Port Louis, Aapravasi Ghat (aapravasi.govmu.org) is where close to half a million Indians landed as early as 1829. They had signed a contract with the colonists, in pursuit of land just a little way off from India, but were instead sent on a long sea journey to work in the sugarcane farms of Mauritius.

"The indentured labourers brought in from India were quarantined on the northern islands off Mauritius like the Flat island," informed Meenakshi, one of the guides at the Aapravasi Ghat, a UNESCO Heritage Site. She also added that Flat Island was once delegated as a quarantine station, locally known as lazaretto, that offered bare minimal living conditions, and

▲ From left: Seven Coloured Earth Geopark has multicoloured dunes formed from molten volcano; Chamarel Waterfall is the tallest single-drop waterfall in Mauritius at about 100 metres high. Below: Aapravasi Ghat is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

GETTING THERE

Air Mauritius (airmauritius.com) offers six weekly direct flights from Mumbai to Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam International Airport in Mauritius.

STAY

Veranda Tamarin Hotel and Spa offers chic bohemian rooms with multi-cuisine dining options. Doubles from ₹16,024; veranda-resorts.com

Domaine de Grand Baie in the northern neighbourhood of Grand Baie offers contemporary luxury rooms and service apartments. Doubles from ₹14,144; domainegrandbaie.com

Le Meridien Ile Maurice offers rooms and suites with unbeatable sea views. Doubles from ₹25,836; marriott.com

deplorable sanitary facilities. Owing to this, many of the migrant labourers who landed perished in the first few months of their arrival. The others who survived and recovered, went on to work on the many sugarcane estates run by the colonists in mainland Mauritius for pittance.

On the last leg of the trip, we opted to stay at Le Meridien Ile Maurice in Pointe aux Piments—a fishing hamlet that turned out to be a dreamy romantic getaway. We also explored its outskirts dotted with French chateaus and sugarcane plantations. Back at Le Meridien, we indulged in a special cooking session with chef Maken Shiv Aum who taught us to prepare the Sept Cari meal. With origins in southern India, the Sept Cari meal, meaning 'seven curries' is a spread consisting of several vegetable preparations served on fresh plantain leaves along with hot rice. It turned out to be the perfect ending to the seven-day road trip. Accompanying the meal was a rainbow in the sky and the ivory sands of Mauritius. +



UNDER

They say the Finns
are the happiest
people in the world.
On a journey through
the Finnish Lapland and
capital city of Helsinki,
SIMRRAN GILL discovers
the secret to this
happiness and
much more.

THE

NORDDISK
YKKY

COURTESY OF ALEXANDER KUZNETSOV





*On clear nights,
one can spot Aurora
Borealis from the
science centre and
museum, Arktikum
in Rovaniemi.*



MW

EYES ARE CONSTANTLY SHIFTING focus—from the tree-lined road to the digital clock, then to a complex map of sorts on a phone set atop the dashboard. We're cruising at nearly 110 km/hr, and are now somewhere close to the Swedish border, the surrounding dense forest and dark roads indicating our distance from the city. My companion and expert guide for the evening, Ryan Olivera, continues to take a look at the sky through the windshield and then at the map on his phone. A few more serpentine curves later, we arrive at Lake Vietonen, and a short walk through the wilderness leads us to its banks.

"Look up. Quick! Right above your ahead," says Olivera with a renewed energy; he is determined to make this expedition successful. As I wiggle out of my winter layers and crane my neck, the Rovaniemi sky slowly begins to light up, small streaks of green now appearing against its dark grey canvas. And in the next couple of minutes, the Aurora Borealis puts on a cinematic show—hues of green, pink, and purple dance above us, and on the ground, excited squeals take over. Later that night, we celebrate the spotting with a cosy bonfire and toasty marshmallows.

EARLIER THAT AFTERNOON, I had taken a short flight from Helsinki to Rovaniemi and spent the whole day diving in and out of the region's history, culture, traditions, art, and more. And to get a lay of the land, our first stop, naturally, was the science centre and museum, Arktikum. The visit turned out to be a well-rounded history and science lesson, tracing the Finnish culture's evolvement and decoding the science and traditional beliefs behind Aurora Borealis. "During summers, the sun doesn't set till midnight but winters come with almost zero sunlight. We are prepping for them now," Salla Tauriainen, media visit & PR coordinator of Visit Rovaniemi explained Rovaniemi's unique geographical positioning.

From top: Irene Kangasniemi strikes a pose outside her house; a walk through Helsinki Central Park reveals interesting and culturally significant art pieces; Little Finlandia serves authentic flavours of Finland.



*A warm sunny
afternoon in
Rovaniemi.*



▲ From left: A blueberry bush at Helsinki Central Forest during autumn season; Helsinki boasts an extensive network of trams and trains, and dedicated paths for pedestrians and cyclists.

The Arctic Circle winds rarely leave your side in Rovaniemi. But the warmth of the people here is what keeps one going. It is the morning after the great show of northern lights; we are at Irene Kangasniemi's home and workshop to experience this warmth and hospitality. Irene, along with her husband Ari, exemplifies the Finnish lifestyle—simple, warm and in the lap of nature. And if you've ever carried a handcrafted souvenir back from the area, it is highly likely that the Kangasniemis have crafted it for you. The couple runs an artisan workshop, Hornwork (hornwork.fi) and puts together masterpieces made from local materials such as wood and reindeer antlers. Fascinated by similarities between Finnish figurines and India's Warli art, Irene opens up her workshop for us to create our own masterpieces. As I indulge my artistic side to make a Finnish souvenir, Irene, with wide eyes, asks if I've ever gotten my hands in the game before. And I can't help but wonder if hours of watching Nifty craft videos have finally paid off.

IN THE DAYS LEADING UP TO MY TRIP, I tried to understand what makes Finland one of the happiest countries in the world. The answer was much simpler than

I thought and waiting for me in Helsinki, the capital city of Finland. The Finnish people firmly believe in “everyman's right”, and to familiarise myself with this concept further, I visit Helsinki Central Park, a forest in the middle of the city. A few steps along a bushy landscape, we are handed small bowls by Karri Korppi, founder and CEO of Happy Guide Helsinki, a responsible travel company. He is prepping us for an experience that the Finns have enjoyed for years now—foraging in the forest. “The forest and its produce are for everyone. This is what we call ‘everyman's right’ here in Finland,” says Korppi as he points towards the bushes. And since it is autumn, it's the perfect season to pick berries. It takes me a few attempts to learn the technique, but by the end of the walk, the bowl has a sizeable number and a good mix of lingonberries, raspberries, and blueberries. On our way back, Korppi further talks about Helsinki's rich natural bounty. “This forest extends all the way till Helsinki-Vantaa International Airport,” he shares, and my Delhi-oriented lungs urge me to take a deep breath to get a substantial dose of the oxygen rich air.

The country's ethos of sharing resources can be further admired at Oodi Central Library (oodihelsinki.fi),



▲
An aerial view of Oodi, a three-storeyed building exemplifying Finnish architecture and sustainability.

which is rightly called Helsinki's living room. "Oodi is a birthday gift that the Finnish gave to themselves a few years ago. During the evening, everyone is here and that is why we call it Helsinki's living room," says my guide Heidi Johansson who takes me through its hallways. The three-storeyed building boasts a fast-paced ground floor, a work-dedicated first floor, and a glass-facade library on the top floor. Exemplifying Finnish architecture on one hand and sustainability on the other, this urban public space, right opposite the Parliament Building, is much more than what its name suggests, I realise.

Over the next few days, I realise the country's deep-seated commitment to sustainability as well as towards preserving green spaces. Nature in Helsinki is always a short walk away, and the city as a whole encourages environment-friendly lifestyles. For starters, the residential units are surrounded by either parks, forest, or the sea. The extensive and functional network of trams and trains, and streamlined mobility of pedestrians and cyclists, are all efforts being made towards a more sustainable future. In fact, the Finns also diligently work towards reducing overconsumption of resources and

believe that not everything needs to be newly bought or owned. It is here that Oodi's incredible offerings—right from toolkits to 3D printers—come handy. One of Helsinki's goals is to become carbon-neutral by 2035, and one can track this progress with an online tool named 'Climate Watch' that gives information about traffic, construction, and consumption amidst other categories.

The Finns not only care for their environment and surroundings seriously, but also their own mental and physical well-being. And to make sure that everyone has access to resources for the same, there is Kamppi Chapel (*kampinkappeli.fi*), the quietest corner in all of Helsinki, ironically located at the busiest area, Narinkkatori Square. "We often come here to just sit in silence, probably after a bad day. There are professionals inside the premises as well, in case someone needs professional help," explains Johansson. While there is the nest-like Kamppi Chapel to take care of mental wellbeing, the locals ensure their physical wellbeing through the age-old tradition of sauna. In fact, my guide for the evening, Ulla-Maija Rouhiainen shares how there are more saunas in Finland than cars—nearly three million saunas for over five million people!

Clockwise from right: Arctic TreeHouse Hotel has panoramic views of the surrounding forests; Restaurant Nokka offers the best from Finland's forests and waters; The Cathedral is a famous landmark in the city.

"It is an expression of Finnish lifestyle," she adds. And to get a taste of this unique way to unwind, we stop by Allas Sea Pool (*myhelsinki.fi*). I put my initial reluctance aside and step into the steamy room; the locals did not shy away from adding more water to the hot stones. But the best is yet to come, I'm told. A sauna is almost incomplete without a dip in the cold water. "A dip in the pool," I thought out loud. But I could not have been any more wrong, I realise, as I stood in front of the Baltic Sea with almost numb limbs.

My fitness tracker is on a roll, all thanks to the European walking culture. The walks in Helsinki introduce me to Finland's myriad offerings, especially the art nouveau architecture that is represented in the historical structures and colourful buildings. And it is on one of these walks that I discover Helsinki's famed Market Square at the South Harbour, on one end of the Esplanade Park; The Cathedral, located on the northern side of the Senate Square and part of Helsinki's Empire era that has now become an iconic location in the capital; The Lundqvist, a landmark commercial building; and the National Library of Finland (*kansalliskirjasto.fi*), which is not only a cultural-heritage organisation open to all, but also a noteworthy architectural marvel.

AS I BOARD MY FLIGHT BACK TO NEW DELHI, I realise that I've found not one but plenty of reasons that could be responsible for the happiness of Finland and the Finns. Months later, as I write this on a particularly chaotic and chilly winter evening in Delhi, I reminisce the silence at Oodi, the warmth of the sauna, the beeping of my overworked fitness tracker. I wonder what berries are ready to be foraged at Helsinki Central Park, how the Lapland would look like without the sun, if the Aurora is any brighter this time of the year, what new handicrafts the Kangasniemis are working on—all while being cocooned in a blanket on my bed. For that brief moment, it feels like I brought back a slice of Finnish happiness with me. ✦





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: COURTESY OF ARCTIC TREE HOUSE HOTEL; SIMRRAN GILL; COURTESY OF OMAR EL MRABT

Finding Happiness in Finland

GETTING THERE

Finnair (finnair.com) operates direct and regular flights from New Delhi and Mumbai to Helsinki.

WHERE TO STAY

St George Hotel, Helsinki

Situated by the Old Church Park in the heart of Helsinki, the property has 148 rooms and five suites and is at a convenient distance from all major attractions. *Doubles from ₹21,113; stgeorgehelsinki.com*

Arctic TreeHouse Hotel, Rovaniemi

With a modern Scandinavian design, panoramic views of the Arctic skies and the surrounding forest, Arctic TreeHouse Hotel has various accommodation units, each with their own distinct offerings. *Doubles from ₹64,229; arctictreehousehotel.com*

WHERE TO EAT

Little Finlandia

With a relaxed atmosphere and an outstanding view of Helsinki's landscape, this cafe serves authentic flavours of Finland, with greens, soups, and cheeses. *Meal for two from ₹2,288 (without alcohol); finlandiatalo.fi*

Restaurant Nokka

Helmed by chef Ari Ruoho, it follows the philosophy of 'the best from Finland's forests and waters', and serves the season's best produce, and uses sustainably grown, organic local produce. *Meal for two from ₹13,130 (without alcohol); nokkahelsinki.fi*

Rakas Restaurant and Bar

Located in Arctic TreeHouse Hotel, Rakas has a unique ambience and serves meals prepared from local ingredients with a modern twist. *Entrées from ₹1,686; rakasrestaurant.com*

Street Bistro Roka

Strongly inspired by the United States, Italy, and Finnish Lapland, Roka is an intimate 25-seater restaurant and serves bistro-style and



street food with authentic flavours. *Entrées from ₹444; ravintolaroka.fi*

Gustav Kitchen and Bar

Located in Rovaniemi City Centre, Gustav Kitchen and Bar boasts a limited menu with finest offerings and delicious cocktails in an intimate setting. *Entrées from ₹532; gustavkitchenbar.fi*

WHAT TO DO

Forest Experience in Helsinki

Explore the treasures of the Finnish forest with a guided tour at Helsinki Central Park. *happyguidehelsinki.com*

Sauna at Allas Sea Pool

Experience Finland's long-standing culture of sauna at Allas Sea Pool, which is inspired by the spa heritage of the Baltic Sea. *myhelsinki.fi*

History Lesson at Arktikum

Dive deeper into Finnish Lapland's history and understand the country's unique geographical position here. *arktikum.fi*

Aurora Hunting

Witnessing Aurora Borealis is one of the most thrilling experiences in the Finnish Lapland. *beyondarctic.fi*

Husky Tours

Bearhill Husky Tours provides adrenaline-fuelled husky adventures, and insight into the world of sled dogs and their culture. *bearhillhusky.com*

Date with Santa Claus

Located on the Arctic Circle, Santa Claus Village is the official hometown of Santa Claus in Lapland. *santaclausvillage.info*



YOUR BEST SHOT

THIS PHOTO OF MT BROMO, nestled within the dense rainforests of Eastern Java, Indonesia, was taken with Mt Semeru—another active volcano—in the background. The weather here is always fickle with a tropical thunderstorm often lurking around the corner. About 30 minutes into my early morning hike, I was surrounded by thick clouds and could barely see. A little later, there was a hint of dawn, and eventually, the sun broke through the Java Sea and illuminated a whole series of volcanoes. It was mesmerising! The churning clouds in the valley, steaming volcanoes, the mighty Mt Semeru, and the rising sun, all came together in perfect harmony to create this picture of a lifetime.

—KUNAL GUPTA ON HIS PHOTOGRAPH, TAKEN WITH A SONY α7 IV ON APRIL 14, 2022.

Kunal Gupta was an entrant in our ongoing 'Your Best Shot' contest. Submit your best shots at tplusl@burda.in, or use the hashtag [#telltnlindia](https://www.instagram.com/telltnlindia) and tag [@travelandleisureindia](https://www.instagram.com/travelandleisureindia) on Instagram, to stand a chance to get featured on this page.

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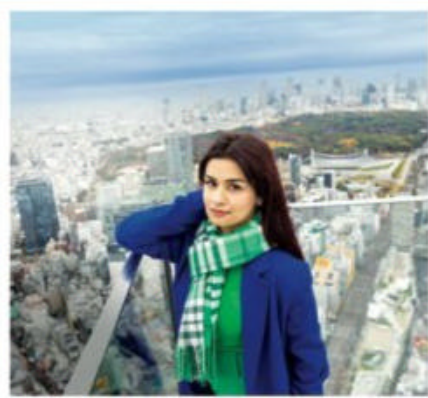
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